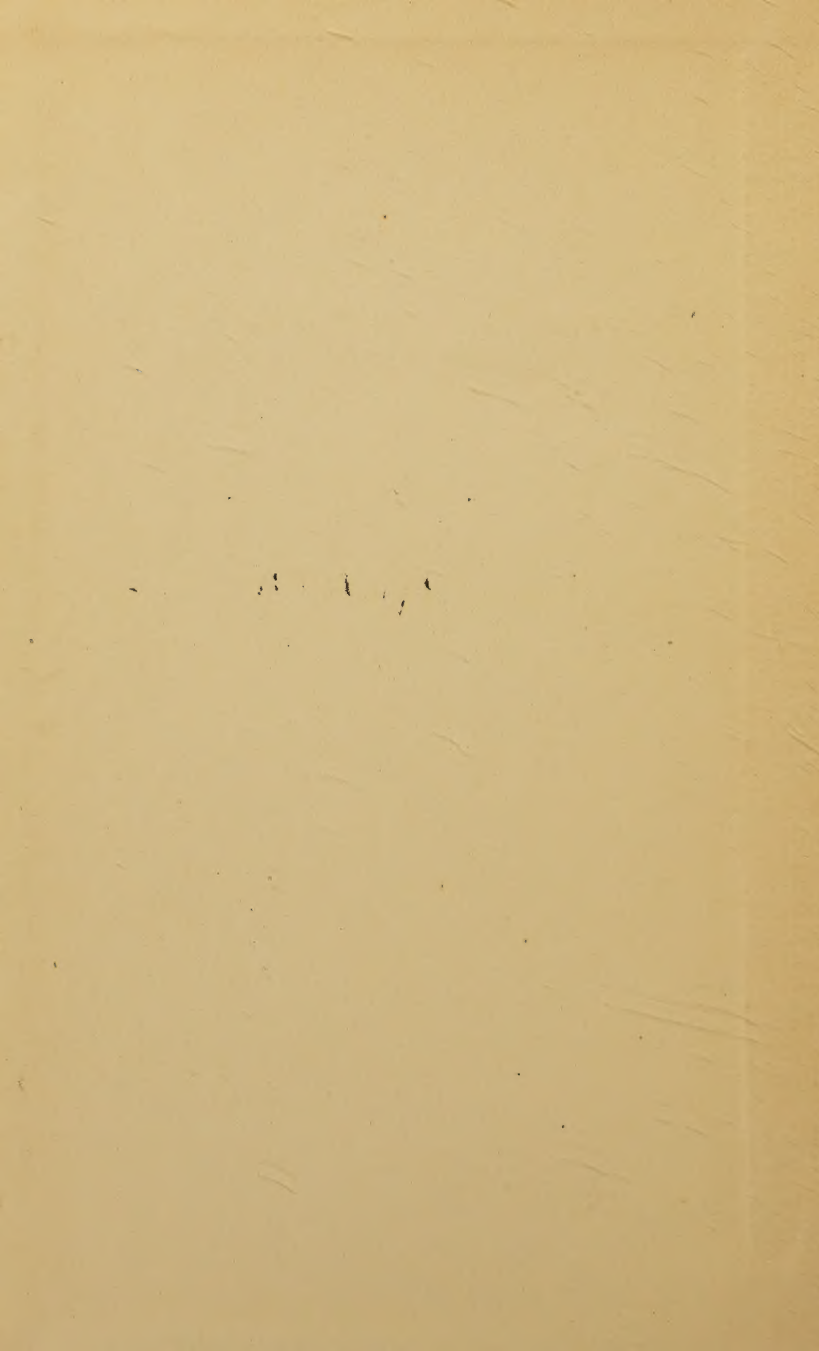




*Through Sea
and Sky*
E. Keble Chatterton



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THROUGH SEA AND SKY

By E. Keble Chatterton

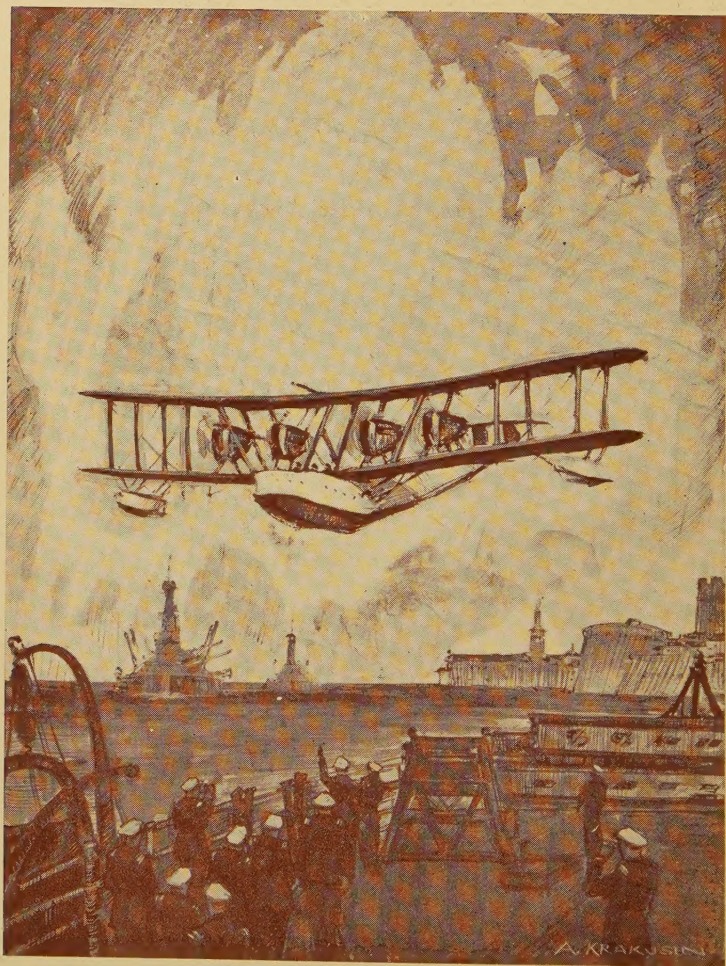
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The King of the Air
In Great Waters
Through Sea and Sky



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THROUGH SEA AND SKY

BY E. KEBLE CHATTERTON

With Illustrations by Alfred Krakusin



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ILLUSTRATIONS

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THROUGH SEA AND SKY

Chapter I

CAPTAIN HARWOOD, late Chief Officer of the S. S. *Orel*, but now master of that fine Motor Ship *Speranza*, walked into the Modern Mariners' Club, Piccadilly, chose out his favourite arm-chair, and had barely begun to wrestle with a great mental problem surging through his active brain than he was summoned to a youthful visitor waiting in the hall.

Harwood's eyes opened wide.

"Bob Crane! Well! Of all the pleasant surprises! Come right in! I thought you were still in New York—with Wilmer Lorning."

"I was—until a week ago," answered the smiling English lad. "Been serving part of my time in a freighter running fruit from the West Indies to Boston."

"You were going to work for a Mate's ticket?"

"Until this aviation got hold of me," the keen-eyed youngster corrected. "But ever

since Lindbergh and the other fellows flew the seas, Wilmer and I sort of felt—well, we can think of nothing but flying.”

Harwood threw back his great shoulders and laughed as only men accustomed to the wide ocean spaces seem capable.

“That’s the second strange coincidence this day. And yet it’s natural enough. Listen, Bob: I’m having a month’s leave at the Green Funnel Line’s expense, whilst *Speranza* has her refit. How have I been occupying my time? Learning, on one of those secluded Essex estuaries, to handle a flying-boat. Passed out and qualified as a pilot yesterday! Oh, there’s no sort of question: the future of travel is in the sky.”

“Wilmer keeps rubbing that in to his father. Mr. Lorning is now President of the Green Funnel Line. I believe they both see that the Anglo-American Aerial Transport Company will be the biggest. . . .”

“What?”

"Of course—you haven't heard? Well, I've got a pilot's ticket myself. Mr. Lorning just sent me over here to find a suitable aerodrome for the new London-New York route. It's a bit hush-hush at present. Wilmer's specialising in airplane engines, been working for months in a mass-production factory. He's arriving by the *Megalantic* at Southampton in three days' time. Got to interview some big birds about a contract."

Harwood's face regained its solemnity.

"Three days? Too late! Sit down and I'll explain. My old shipmate in the Great War, Admiral Sir James Rawlyn. . . ."

"Late Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet. I remember."

". . . but now in charge of Room 909 at the Admiralty. . . ."

Bob frowned in wonder.

"Ah! That conceals the most secret department in all London. Rawlyn has to keep track of all the newest scientific developments not

yet known to the world. But Room 909 is also the headquarters for watching foreign spies. You'd never guess."

Harwood glanced round, drew his chair closer, and lowered his voice.

"Quite recently," he almost whispered, "some genius invented the terrible Z-ray. It was found to be so overwhelmingly fatal that the British and American Governments decided, in the interests of humanity, this dreadful discovery must never be used."

"Yes," Bob encouraged, breathless with excitement.

"So all formulae, data, documents—and even the apparatus itself—were purchased from the inventor, who died shortly afterwards. Rawlyn was examining the docket of these papers, when the telephone rang, and he went into the corridor to see someone who wished to speak with him."

"Why couldn't the visitor come inside?"

"For the reason that no stranger was ever

allowed in Room 909. But judge of Rawlyn's horror when, after five minutes' absence, he discovered the window wide open, and the docket of Z-ray data gone! Not a trace of it! Vanished!"

"Phew! Stolen?"

The seafarer nodded. "The Admiral is at his wits' end. The most terrible threat to humanity is now in wrong hands. Anything may happen. Scotland Yard's cleverest detectives have nothing to offer but theories. They're baffled."

Bob Crane was thrilled. "What is this mysterious Z-ray?" he demanded.

"Well, I'm no scientist, but I can tell you a few things it's capable of doing. They've proved that from a distance of two miles it can set on fire houses, as well as the fabric of any aircraft. At five miles it will kill immediately any person or animal. At twenty miles it can still render any ship's compass useless by causing it to revolve: thus endangering

valuable lives when the vessel is not in sight of land. But even at a range of ten miles the Z-ray will burn through a merchantman's steel hull as if the oxy-acetylene process was at work."

"Then some smart crook with this docket could easily hold up the world's traffic?"

"You've put it in a sentence."

"Ship's officers will be murdered invisibly, passengers and cargo will be destroyed, steamers burnt and sunk. I say, Skipper, couldn't we help find the culprit before it's too late?"

Already the young Englishman, descendant of master mariners, was stirred to the duties of the sea's brotherhood. But at that precise moment a rosy-faced, dignified, though harassed figure, in a tightly-buttoned suit, burst in on their conversation.

"Admiral Rawlyn! We were just discussing the situation, sir. Oh, it's all right—Bob Crane is too good a fellow to be indiscreet. Besides—he's most anxious to help us."

Sir James was a man of few words.

"Felt sure I should find you here. Give me a moment, please."

"Any news, sir?"

"No, Harwood, except this: my own anti-spy organisation, working with the detectives, feels convinced that the docket was stolen by a paid cat-burglar on behalf of a desperate gang of crooks known as the 'Rovers.' Their symbol is a black hand; their plan will now probably be to operate the Z-ray along the sea trade-routes, rob the big liners, defy any British or American cruiser, and institute a genuine reign of terror."

Bob received a knowing wink from the Mercantile skipper, who inquired:

"You've no more definite facts, sir?"

"Simply these: we've had inquiries made at every electrical-supply factory, and every store where they sell apparatus. Within the last few days apparently a couple of strange men—one of them with a distinct Continental

accent—have been buying certain bits of electrical mechanism which are but rarely asked for. Pieced together, these parts we find to be essential for the secret Z-ray process. It would need exceptional ability and care; but the information in the docket would enable the complete apparatus to be assembled, and death-dealing, within a week.”

“Then there’s no time to be wasted,” Bob butted in eagerly. “This looks like a real-life detective sea-story, with the sky as a background.”

“It’s more serious than that,” corrected the gallant Admiral. “If the press and public in either hemisphere get to know about it, there’ll be a nasty rumpus. They’ll demolish me, and make it impossible to hinder the ‘Rovers.’”

“You hinted yesterday at an airplane,” Harwood took up. “Anything in that theory?”

“That’s why I’ve come to see you: as a flying expert, I need your careful help. It is definitely known that a private three-seater

biplane was stolen from the hangar of the Regis Flying Club, Surrey, that same night. This may or may not have something to do with our problem."

The ship-master pondered a moment.

"Let's assume that the 'Rovers' stole it in order to get right away."

"Why?"

"To reach some secret place where, undisturbed, they could complete construction of the apparatus. They knew that every port in England would be immediately watched by your men, but they must have been pretty good flyers to start off on a dark, moonless night."

"Then you don't agree that the Z-rays will be used from a surface ship?"

"I'd prefer to suppose that the apparatus will be installed in the airplane. She'd be more mobile—more difficult to locate."

"Mph!" grunted the worried Admiral. "It's a nice situation. She'll be able to flash

these death-rays as easily as she could flash out the Morse code. One thing is quite certain—the missing airplane is still somewhere in the British Isles.”

“How d’you know that?”

“The Air Ministry, the Continental air stations, the coastguards, the police are quite definite that no aircraft crossed the English Channel or North Sea that night. You may not be aware that by a series of secret listening-posts along the coastline, we can record instantly any craft in the sky. Every flying machine since that night has been accounted for!”

“Then the Regis machine must be hiding in some remote creek till the apparatus is ready?”

Even if she is, as you say, a land-plane, there’s nothing to prevent the ‘Black-handers’ having a couple of light floats waiting up the creek ready to be fixed on for sea work.”

"Well?" encouraged the Admiral willing to be convinced.

"She could then choose her time for operating from this secret and lonely base, and you may be sure these headquarters will be convenient to the trade-routes of steamers."

Sir James thumped the arm of his chair.

"If you were head of the 'Rovers,' Harwood, what spot would you choose?"

"The west coast of Ireland, or Scotland. Preferably the former. I spent part of the war patrolling that area for submarines. There are twenty sheltered coves I could mention at once—each of them miles from a village, railway, road, or telegraph: yet within a very short flying distance of the Atlantic liners."

"Then that settles it," the Admiral leapt to his feet with the first vestige of a smile. "I want you to play the part of an aerial detective: I'll ask you to comb the coast and find the 'Rovers,' dead or alive, before their

operations begin. Look here, can you leave for Portsmouth this afternoon?"

"Portsmouth?" repeated Bob, not quite understanding.

"There's a secret super flying-boat lying there up the harbour, guarded day and night. She's called the *Gannet*, and has just been finished for the Navy's use. She's the most wonderful aircraft in the world: there's nothing like her anywhere for size and speed. Will you be a good fellow and take her over?"

The skipper looked at Bob significantly. The boy's heart was beating fast, and it seemed a long suspense before Captain Harwood made answer. Finally,

"Provided I may choose my own crew," was the decision.

"Oh, cert'nly. You'll need two engineers and one observer. They'll be ready awaiting your arrival."

"Thank you, but I have my Observer here. Bob is an old shipmate. I'd like one of your

naval mechanics, but the other engineer is Wilmer Lorning. He's due from America on Wednesday. I told Bob it would be too late, but I've thought of a plan: if the *Megalantic* doesn't arrive in time we'll go out and meet her."

"Cheers!" exclaimed Bob loyally. "Wilmer would never forgive us if we left him out of this. What time do we start?"

The Admiral gave his approval and was ready for so practical a question.

"I'm sending a car to pick you up here to-night at nine. Meanwhile, keep in touch with me by wireless wherever you fly. As regards fuel," he rubbed his chin meditatively, "I'll arrange for all facilities if only you'll state requirements. Good-bye, and thank you both for rendering a great service to the . . ."

"Just one thing, sir. What are my instructions? How far may I cruise?"

The red-cheeked sea-dog grinned confidently.

“Find the ‘Rovers,’ seek them anywhere between the North and South Poles; as far east as the beginning of dawn, as far west as the sun’s setting.”

“That means the whole world,” inferred Bob when the Admiral had departed. “I say, Skipper, this is going to be some trip. I wish we were on board *Gannet* now—don’t you?”

But Harwood’s brain was full of a dozen items that needed careful sorting out.

“First of all,” he recollected, “I must ’phone the Green Funnel Line’s Marine Superintendent for indefinite leave; then I’ve got to do some shopping. Bob, you’d better rush round to your hotel, send a radiogram to Wilmer, pack your grip and be back here in time for a jolly good dinner. I’ve a sort of idea that this *Gannet* adventure is going to be something worth our attention.”

Bob thought so, too. This is the message he handed in to be wirelessly:

“Skipper Harwood and self in flying-boat

Gannet coming to meet you. Be ready for chance of your life. Bob."

That same evening in Piccadilly arrived the following reply per S. S. *Megalantic*:

"You bet I will. Cheerio. Wilmer."

Chapter II

THE high-powered Rolls-Royce rushed across London, steered by that cool skill which belongs only to a former naval coxswain accustomed to the wheel of a destroyer. It fascinated Bob to note how motorbuses, lamp-posts, policemen, lorries, and trucks were all dodged with pin-point proximity. After this stuffy June day, it was good to feel the refreshing breeze.

Putney Common flashed past; the famous stone where seven of England's sovereigns were crowned at Kingston-on-Thames sped by. The old market-place which heard the first shots fired in the quarrel between Charles I and his Parliament; the distant gables of Wolsey's famous Hampton Palace; Esher Place where Drake sent Spanish prisoners from the Armada for safe-keeping; and now Guilford, with its historic clock, leapt towards them.

"Ghosts of bye-gone sailor men!" Harwood

exclaimed. "The famous Portsmouth Road! Can't you almost hear the old coaches rumbling along with pressed men for Trafalgar? Nelson came this way; Anson's men travelled this road with loot after their trip round the world. Yes," he awoke fresh memories, "some of us in August, 1914, motored along here to join our ships for the Great War."

Bob gave a start. There was a short, sharp rattle. Something flashed past his head. The glass windscreen suddenly was starred with an ugly crack.

"What! A bullet! Gracious—there's a fellow behind that hedge with . . ."

"Keep low," Harwood ordered. "Duck your head. That was a machine gun! Hallo! Another of 'em!"

And then, just as Harwood was feeling a newly-arrived hole in his soft hat, the car made a sudden swerve, hurled them both in a heap on the floor, gave an appalling bump into

the air, and settled down again to a fifty-mile speed.

"Sorry, sir," apologised the chauffeur. "'Tisn't my fault. Someone left a heavy tree across the road."

"Yes, coxswain; and someone has laid a mighty clever ambush for us. If time wasn't so pressing, we'd chase those cowards who hide behind hedges. We'd flatten 'em with our fists."

"An ambush, Skipper?" Bob asked, his lips trembling involuntarily at this amazing incident. For even now he could scarcely believe it had happened.

"There's a serious leakage of state secrets somewhere," Harwood bit his lip. "The Black Hand gang must have learnt we were coming. But for this failing light they'd have got the whole lot of us stone dead. The Admiral shall be made wise to this."

Bob drew a long breath and forced down his excitement.

"Looks to me as if the 'Rovers' are going to be a tough proposition," he had just remarked, when an idea hit him harder than any bullet. "Skipper! I say—did you notice that sallow-faced club waiter hanging around all the time Sir James Rawlyn was talking to us at the Modern Mariners?"

"Man with a crooked nose and jet-black eyes?"

"Short, stumpy fellow."

"I do remember," Harwood paused. "Why! His face was new to me. He must have been a spy. I have heard that on certain occasions a mysterious gang succeeds in getting one into every important London club. Did you ever hear in the Great War the story of . . .? Ah, well. Some other time. Cox'n," he congratulated the man at the wheel, "you did jolly well."

"That's all right, sir," came the good-natured reply. "We're used to surprises. I was with Admiral Rawlyn in the *Royal George*—

bin with him everywhere you might say—but this nine-nought-nine stunt beats the band for fun. Always the unexpected, yet always expecting.”

“You never thought machine-guns on the Portsmouth Road. . . ?”

“Nine-nought-nine did! Admiral warned me just before starting. No, sir, there’s not much gets past him. But he has his dislikes. Half’n hour after I fetched him from seeing you at the club this morning, he had one of the waiters ‘pinched.’ Scotland Yard man fetched him away. They do say it’s a spy case.”

Bob smiled with satisfaction. An hour later the Rolls-Royce entered the historic Portsmouth Dockyard, and drew up alongside the jetty steps.

A Petty Officer came up out of the darkness and saluted.

“And who are you?” Harwood inquired.

“Motor Mechanic of the *Gannet*, sir. She’s lying at that buoy in the stream. Picket-boat

has orders to take us aboard. Any more luggage but these three suit-cases?"

A few minutes later and the moon broke through a cloud to illumine the giant flying-boat rocking lazily to the night breeze. There she was—all sky-blue and gold-lined, her name painted boldly on the bows.

But it was the immensity of her that amazed Bob. The hull was quite a ship in itself, the wings towered above them like some huge city building; yet every curve in the whole design suggested sweeping beauty and unheard-of speed. *Gannet's* bow resembled that of a crack racing yacht; next came eight or ten glass port-holes, till the hull fined away like the tail of a butterfly.

The three of them entered aboard by a door on the starboard side just abaft the foremost cockpit, where the eager Observer noticed the mounting for a light gun.

"Higgin, sir, that's my name," the mechanic answered Harwood. "Yes: I hope we have an

interesting cruise. I've watched every rivet put into her. Oh yes: she's all metal, planes and all. Ever hear of that airship what raced round the world some time back?"

"You mean the *King of the Air*?"

"The very same. She was the first craft ever to use this levirium—strong as steel but lighter than aluminum. I was second mechanic aboard her. But *Gannet*, she's got engines of the same material, too."

He pointed to four propellers, which projected between the two planes.

"The only quadruple heavier-than-air vessel in the world. Each engine develops 5000 horse-power!"

"Higgin, you're trying to exaggerate."

"No, sir, that's as true as I'm here. What's more, they're a patent. Fuel? They'll run on 'most any kind of oil you like to give them. Here's the big secret—they use mostly air to get the explosion: when once they're nicely warmed up, they hardly need much else. It's

a marvellous invention—it really is. We could cruise thousands of miles without refilling the tanks.”

Even Harwood scratched the back of his head in wonder. They wandered aft through a small saloon with a table and shelves. Then came a tiny galley, next a small cabin for the commanding officer, a light bulkhead for the wireless, a cot that let down as Higgin’s bed, and finally two cushioned bunks further aft for the boys on either side of the hull.

“Trial run at dawn tomorrow,” Harwood commanded when his inspection was finished. “We’re tired now. Good-night.”

But next morning’s trip as far as the French coast and back revealed the necessity of several minor adjustments: the two inner motors were hardly giving their full number of revolutions. By the following mid-day Harwood’s critical senses were satisfied.

“We’ve lost thirty-six valuable hours,” he admitted, “but a new craft needs tuning up.

And who knows how long we shall be away! The picket-boat is coming alongside with three months' provisions in an hour's time. She had a busy experience last night."

"Oh?"

"She was ordered by the Commander-in-Chief to patrol round us. Twice, between midnight and high water, we were nearly run down by collision and sunk. The Lieutenant in charge says it was deliberate. The skipper of a strange tug entering the port said his engines broke down: a heavy barge pretended she got caught by the tide which drifted her towards us helplessly."

"Coincidence or conspiracy," Bob remarked with a wink.

"That'll be decided after we've started. At present the two vessels are under arrest."

"The Black Hand again!" was all that Bob had further to say just then.

Late that afternoon, however, *Gannet's* engines were all running with a mighty roar that

made the Portsdown hills echo and brought on deck every officer and man in battleship, cruiser or destroyer. Dockyard workmen halted at their tasks and gazed in wonder at this mammoth bird. Bob and Harwood slipped into their diver-like airsuits before climbing into the main cockpit, and at length the trip began.

A wave of the hand indicated that Higgin was to let go the buoy rope; then, after taxiing along the water for seventy seconds, the great *Gannet* rose gracefully into the summer sky to the cheers of spectators on land and the shrill sirens of ships at Spithead. The massive rudder was put over, and the huge sea-bird swung on to her course down the Solent, past the Isle of Wight, over white-sail dots, black liners and grey massive battle-cruisers.

Bob, with the appreciation of an expert pilot, had noted the skill with which his skipper had taken off in a crowded area, pulled the control column back, and opened up all four

engines gradually. He had watched with admiration how cleverly she had been kept on an even keel laterally, both wing-tips at an equal distance from the water.

"That's airmanship," he began, thinking aloud. "Not always easy in a standard type; but a ten-ton boat measuring two-hundred-and-forty feet from bow to stern, and nearly that from wing-tip to wing-tip, needs some handling."

Two hours later he was ordered to relieve Harwood. The white Dorset coast had sped by; the forty miles of open sea from Portland Bill to the red cliffs of Devon, the lonely Eddystone lighthouse came and went; Cornwall's fishing fleets, Scilly islands—all moved past the eyes as in a cinema.

And then, after studying the chart closely, Harwood gave Bob the compass-course that should take them well out on to the Atlantic trade-route.

"We ought to pick up Wilmer's ship about

here," he pointed to a pencilled mark. "Let me take over for a while. Better send a wireless to *Megalantic's* skipper. We're doing a steady two-hundred miles an hour," he glanced at the indicator's dial. "We should meet him about 4 p.m. Ask the captain if he would be good enough to heave-to and send Wilmer off in a boat."

Bob felt doubtful. "It's an unusual precedent."

"Granted: but the circumstances are abnormal. Make it quite clear that the matter is imperative—that Wilmer must be picked up this very afternoon."

So, whilst the blue and gold flying-boat tore along over the trackless ocean towards the westerning sun, with scarcely a speck in sight, Bob began ticking out a long message calling up the Europe-bound liner.

The reply was brief and discomfoting.

"Captain declines to stop. Has mails on

board and been delayed by fog. Besides, it's contrary to the Company's orders."

Harwood was not going to be put off by any red tape regulations, and was already devising a scheme, when Bob broke in with a suggestion.

"When Wilmer sees us and can't come aboard, he'll be so mad that there'll be trouble. I warrant he's hardly slept a wink since he got our longer message from Portsmouth. Look here, Skipper, give Wilmer a chance. Just that: he'll do the rest."

Harwood nodded, and went on completing his plans. It was going to be a dangerous experiment, but he would try it.

Just before the expected hour, a smudge of smoke on the horizon became a shape with two masts and four funnels. A few minutes later, the mighty *Gannet* began circling round her, as an officer on the liner's bridge was trying to focus his binoculars at the unusual sight. Passengers came running up to the boat-

deck from tea, and then one solitary figure right aft by the stern was recognised waving a white handkerchief and semaphoring.

"It's Wilmer!" Bob shouted from the foremost cockpit, wild with excitement. "He's going to make a jump for it!"

"Semaphore back: 'Wait. Too risky. Ship must slow down.' It's certain death to him if he tries."

They were thrilling moments that ensued. Bob was balancing himself with difficulty as he stood in the cockpit trying to semaphore against the fierce wind which *Gannet* was creating, but Wilmer was determined. Away from interference, they watched him look round on deck, lay hold of a rope, make one end fast to a bollard, take a turn with the other end round his waist, and then mount the taffrail.

"By jove, he's going to do it," Harwood exclaimed, terror-struck. "If he doesn't break his neck, he'll be sucked down and cut to

pieces by the *Megalantic's* wing propeller. Stop him—stop him at all costs!”

But Wilmer had turned his back—it was too late now to try dissuasion. There was a movement on the liner's lofty bridge, but neither Bob nor Harwood could see that. There was a sharp clang deep down in the engine-room, but the *Gannet's* people never heard that.

Higgin looked on with nervousness. In all his flying experience he had never felt so convinced of an impending tragedy. Harwood was throttling down; he was cutting out two of his engines; he was again turning the flying-boat to come along the liner's side as near and as slowly as he dared.

And then, as soon as Wilmer, in true seaman-like manner, had uncoiled fathoms of rope so as to ensure everything running free, the boy was seen to take a long breath after the fashion of a high diver. For a terrible few seconds he stood poised on the rail, fell forward slightly as a big ocean wave made the

steamer roll; rocked backward, and nearly fell inboard, recovered his balance quickly, took another deep breath, and sprang right into the air, just as a guernsied sailor came running aft.

Bob held his breath, Higgin muttered something inaudible, the rope made a semi-circle in space, there was a sudden area of white froth astern of the liner, and Wilmer could be seen in white flannels against the black hull swinging violently out and in—a mere insect between wind and water.

“Smash his head open in half a second,” Higgin was certain.

And then a fresh horror seized the three spectators.

“The rope’s slipping from his waist,” Bob cried. “His hands are slipping, too. He can’t hold on any longer. Skipper, this is awful.”

But Harwood never answered. His mouth was firm, his hands were obeying his brain, he was thinking of a thousand things at once, he was reckoning up the pros and cons of this

trying situation. If the *Gannet* in alighting were to hit the crest of one big wave at even that speed, it would smash *her* up. Not till this low altitude had he realised such a big swell was running.

“Wilmer’s gone!”

Captain Harwood, most experienced of mariners, winner of the Victoria Cross for war-time bravery, accustomed to face all sorts of situations in all the seven seas, felt his heart almost stop. He reached out of the cockpit this way and that, but there was no sign of a boy’s head in the valleys or on the mountains of that watery vastness.

He turned his flying-boat away, as the great black liner carried on. Back to the spot where there was still a frothy foam, the *Gannet* was planing down with engines shut off. He must make a last gamble now; it was the one chance of gliding into a smooth patch and hoping against hope—against a million probabilities that Wilmer had gone to his doom.



BACK TO THE SPOT WHERE THERE WAS STILL A FROTHY FOAM,
THE *Gannet* WAS PLANING DOWN

"Wouldn't be alive, if he *was* found," Higgin made no concealment of his certainty. But, as *Gannet* came down and smacked the sea with flattening effect, Harwood shouted to the distressed Bob a few feet for'ard.

"Can you see him? Has he come up? Higgin—keep a smart look-out astern. D'you see anything?"

There was no answer. Then, "I dunno, sir. What—what's that over there, just to starboard? It's . . . must have been mistaken. Looked as if . . ."

"Yes, there is something; or there was," called Bob. A wave blotted out the view from his eyes. But immediately afterwards something made him act with rapid and desperate decision.

Chapter III

FOR a period that seemed an eternity, but was not more than five seconds, three pairs of eyes searching the hollows of those mighty Atlantic waves were striving to cheat death of a keen, brave life.

Suddenly Bob's voice broke the tenseness of the situation.

"There's Wilmer!" He glanced again. "Yes, it is," he banished any sort of doubt.

The *Gannet* had almost lost her way, but she was rolling rather ominously in the heavy swell, and Harwood's face indicated some of his anxiety.

Quick as a flash, Bob was out of the cockpit, rushing aft, and then to the tip of the starboard wing. Lying on his chest, he climbed down to the float, which promptly dipped his head and shoulders into the heaving sea. He made a bold grab at his objective, missed, seized it again, lost hold of it as *Gannet* rolled

awkwardly to port, and then in one desperate reach of his left hand, Bob was clinging with a wild determination to the back of Wilmer's sodden collar.

"Give you a hand, sir, give you a hand? Now then—all together. Lift!"

It was the alert Higgin who had nipped along at the critical moment and, by hanging on with his feet perilously, was able to encircle his tattooed arms round Wilmer's body.

"Now wait till she rolls again," the mechanic advised. The *Gannet* obliged them almost instantly. "Lift! Lift! Up with 'im!"

They rolled, dragged, pushed the dripping figure on to the plane, and, in their combined exertions, narrowly escaped themselves slipping into the sea.

Harwood was shouting from his cockpit.

"Is he still breathing? Artificial respiration—begin at once," he commanded.

But the prone figure half raised itself.

"Why! There's my dear old friend . . ." the

rescued boy spluttered a mouthful of salt water, "... the Skipper! I'm cert'nly damp—but otherwise fine," the young American insisted. Then, sitting bolt upright and taking a deep breath, he surveyed the unusual scene of this immense bird, with its slim dolphin-like hull. "Say, Skip'," he called to Harwood, cheerily, "isn't this a great stunt? I guess 'tis the funniest way of coming aboard you ever. . . ."

But with a wave of Harwood's hand the rescuers carried Lorning through a hatch into the spacious saloon below. Wilmer's first reaction of surprise was at the seven feet of headroom. He looked round in bewilderment at the arched ceiling, the electric lights, the mahogany cupboards, the wedgewood-blue and white paint, the net-racks over the settees, the long vista of the fore-and-aft view.

"Gee! Some ship? I'll tell the world it is."

Bob was busily tearing off the adventurer's heavily-soaked clothes and producing from a

neat locker towels, shirts, and a set of clean dry flannels; whilst the resourceful Higgin soon came running down the corridor, from a roaring Primus cooking stove bearing a glass of hot milk.

“Cap’n says you’re to do no more talkin’ till you’ve drunk the lot. And I’ve brought you some almond cake, sir.”

Ten minutes later, as if he had merely been practising some speciality in a swimming bath, Wilmer was sitting, full of vigour and enthusiasm, alongside Harwood. The latter had just given the order to start up engines, and was gradually opening out the throttle; but all was not well.

“Just what I feared,” the Skipper thought aloud. “Taking off in rough water is the most difficult task for any flying boat. But a giant seabird like *Gannet* . . . heavy Atlantic waves like these . . . doesn’t give her a chance.”

Wilmer kept his tongue still, but his eyes open. He was watching with fascinated in-

terest. He looked at the enormous four propellers revolving like terrific windmills, yet the engines were running so smoothly that there was little noise.

With a great leap *Gannet* ran up a green mountain, missed its breaking crest, was knocked into the air whilst still hydroplaning, and then came down again with a sickening bounce.

"I doubt if she'll do it," Harwood was uttering. "If only we could get a smooth patch"

With admirable skill he kept her to the water till she gathered speed sufficiently. Once it looked as if her bows would plunge straight into a wall of solid sea. But Wilmer, with silent respect, was noticing the combined air-manship and seamanship which the master mariner was displaying.

"Never pull this control column back too soon," Harwood was explaining, with his hand grasping the joystick. "If you do, any flying-

boat falls back on the water tail down, and bounces worse than before."

Wilmer nodded in appreciation.

"And don't keep the joystick forward too long—or she'll do a nose dive."

So saying, Harwood seized his opportunity, gave a short burst of speed with throttle further opened, and then with majestic soaring, the mighty *Gannet*, head to wind, rose from sea to blue sky. The boy took a glance at the compass and saw they were now heading on a course slightly to the north of East. There was a hand wave to the *Megalantic*, and the four-funnelled liner was soon a mere speck astern.

"Wilmer," there was at last time to congratulate, "that was a plucky act to have leapt as you did. I saw the officer-of-the-watch stop his engines and go astern, but *Megalantic* can't bring up under a good mile. If her way hadn't been checked, you'd have broken your

neck at that speed. We'll send a wireless message to thank her."

"See here, Skip'," Wilmer interrupted, just as Bob joined them from below. "There's something I've got to tell you, but it's secret. Second Officer of that liner's one of my father's friends--comes up to see us on Park Avenue sometimes. Listen--some guy has been playing practical jokes by radio the last twelve hours."

Bob gave both ears to this news.

"Warned *Megalantic* never to leave Southampton if she didn't want to be sunk next voyage. And then--funny thing--the wireless aerial went all crackle and fused, but they had it repaired and working half an hour later."

"Any sign of fires breaking out?" Bob asked calmly. Wilmer looked surprised.

"How did you guess that? I wasn't even allowed to mention it. One of the lifeboats on the starboard side of the boatdeck was burnt right through, early this morning. Theory was

that some passenger might have dropped a cigarette end on the canvas covering."

"Well?" Bob smiled knowingly.

"Till the deck steward swore that there wasn't anyone up there before breakfast. After this affair, no one was allowed on that deck. Curious, isn't it?"

"Then the Black Hand Rovers aren't wasting much time," Harwood inferred.

Wilmer was thrilled by that remark. "Why! That's the guy who sent the radio. The end of the message was 'by order . . . Chief of the Black Hand Rovers.' Say, you've got to tell me all about these crooks."

And it was whilst Bob related the whole story, not excluding the drive to Portsmouth, that *Gannet* in her rapid stride sighted first an apparently low-lying cloud which shaped itself quickly into cliff, with a curious cigarette-like vertical object rising out of the sea perched on a lonely rock.

"Southwest coast of Ireland," Harwood

pointed, "and that is the Fastnet Lighthouse. Come on, Wilmer, take over, and follow the headlands to the northwest. If you see anything strange, telephone down that loud-speaker to the saloon. I'll go and find out if Higgin's got grub ready. You boys must be famished with this sea air."

Bob took a true pilot's delight in explaining *Gannet's* devices. It needed but a moment to indicate the rudder-bar for controlling the three massive rudders, and Wilmer well enough understood how to work the ailerons from the joystick. A minute later, as he sat comfortably in the middle of the three cockpits, he had got the exact "feel" of the craft: she was already his servant. In front of him were the altimeter, speed indicator, revolution indicator, inclinometer and oil-pressure gauge, whilst to his right was a light collapsible frame with a chart of the Atlantic in front of him.

"That's for a quickfiring gun," Bob answered in explanation of a mounting placed

in the foremost cockpit. "Ammunition room is in the hull—opposite the little wireless-room."

"Hallo! What's that?"

Bob followed the direction of his friend's gaze as they swooped down to a few hundred feet over the Fastnet Lighthouse. A man had appeared on the high balcony and was waving a pair of semaphore flags, whilst a second figure was trying to focus a telescope on the fast moving *Gannet*.

Bob immediately signalled back with his arm a readiness to receive, and two minutes later picked up the telephone.

"Skipper? Lighthouse keeper on the Fastnet says there's a ship's lifeboat full of people adrift, somewhere between here and Dursey Head. Lost sight of them some hours ago. Yes. Want help, of course. This fresh S.E. wind sending them out into the Atlantic. . . . Yes . . . must be the Black Handers again. . . . Right! I'll tell Wilmer."

It needed no second summons to go below for the wonderful dinner that was waiting.

"Course nor'west, Higgin," the young American yielded over the controls, as the handy mechanic-cook-plus-general-utility naval petty officer came up through the bulkhead doorway from the hull.

"Aye, aye, sir. There's roast fowl and sausages, peas and mashed potatoes on the table. The jelly wouldn't set right as we're moving too fast. But there's a suet pudding with jam on top."

"What jam?" inquired the hungry Bob. "Which kind?"

"Strawberry, sir. That's what you told me to get."

The boys laughed with joyous anticipation. "Higgin," Wilmer lauded, "you're the finest fellow in the whole Atlantic sky."

But it was the extraordinary comfort and steadiness down below which seemed so pleasing and wonderful. The soup-plates showed

not the slightest tendency to spill the *potage á la marine*; the luscious fresh salmon had no inclination to slide about the table.

"It's all because she's well-designed to the last detail, well-balanced, that she can be flown with hands-off easy. Takes care of herself—you might say—as long as we're over the sea clear of air-pockets," was Harwood's explanation. "Remember this: *Gannet* is different. She's a year ahead of all the world's aircraft. We're mighty lucky to be where we are."

Bob was casually looking through the thick glass window of the circular scuttle at his side, watching the green hills and long blue bays of Ireland reveal themselves. The changing panorama fascinated him. "No Pullman car or steamship could ever be so comfortable," he was thinking. "Oh, give me the air all the time."

But he was more than astonished when the Skipper requested him to open the lid of a re-

frigerator and help himself to a vanilla ice-cream. Wilmer's eyes gleamed.

"Oh, it's quite a simple gadget," Harwood explained the mechanism. "Even on the hottest day there'll be cooling drinks. How? It works off that little shaft and costs nothing. The faster we travel, the more quickly that miniature propeller drives the shaft. It's the same principle as one of those anemometer things that measure the air's force."

"Like a little windmill?"

"Just the same, Bob," Harwood had concurred when Higgin sent a message down the 'phone which brought them on deck into the cockpits. Barely had there been time to stow movable articles in their "fiddle" anti-rolling chocks, than Harwood slipped on his air-helmet and goggles whilst settling himself at the cockpit controls.

"Ship's lifeboat! Something at its mast-head! I get it."

"Several figures lying at the bottom on the

floorboards," Wilmer added as he adjusted his binoculars.

"Likely as not they're the victims of the Black Handers. Some poor passenger steamer been done in by those brutes," Harwood believed. "Think of people dying of hunger and thirst, after losing their ship!"

"They're dead already," Bob was convinced as *Gannet* swooped down to get a more perfect view. "Not one of them has moved."

The sea had smoothed under the shelter of a bold headland: there was only a mild swell now, and the flying-boat could alight with ease.

She was just about to do so, the speed had been eased to seventy knots, Harwood had barely remarked that they must stop alongside for the purpose of seeking some living being, than he put *Gannet* into her glide. Very gradually, as the sea rose to meet them, he had throttled his engines, and then at fifty feet above the water he was in the act of flattening

out over the surface, when something happened that had the effect of a sharp lance.

"Phew!" Bob began rubbing his hand.

"Gee! That hurts!" Wilmer cried out.

They saw Harwood suddenly alter course, they felt *Gannet* bank steeply, heard the propellers immediately set going again, noticed that there was a curious smell, and that the flying-boat was now mounting high into the air.

"Get that gun into position, Bob," he pointed to the fore cockpit. "Jump down to the ammunition room and bring up a few trayfuls," he ordered Wilmer. "We're all of us asleep; we've been caught unawares."

"What's that, sir?" Higgin popped his head out of a hatch.

"Why! That boat's a proper trap. It's sending out Z-rays; it's burnt bits of our paint. Can't you sniff it? If these weren't all-metal wings, we'd be on fire."

"All ready the gun!" Bob announced, as he

began elevating and depressing as soon as Wilmer had slid in the cartridges.

"Wait till the right moment," came the command, "and then blaze away."

"What about the survivors? Pretty tough on them, Skip'?" Wilmer queried.

Harwood laughed. "Survivors? Take another look as we flatten out this time. Ever see men with straw faces before? Those are dummies. Now then, stand by to sink that boat. Riddle her to bits, aim at her mast, and don't fail. Remember she's a danger to Atlantic navigation—and, if you miss, some homeward-bound liner will go to her doom tonight."

Once more *Gannet* glided down with engines stopped, and this time she turned right athwart the strange boat. Bob pressed the trigger and a sharp rattle-rattle-rat pierced the air. But just then Wilmer heard a distant drone and glanced up to windward.

"The Rovers are coming! That's a big

monoplane roaring down wind. There's a black hand painted on his fuselage. I can see it even at this distance."

"Then look out for yourselves: there's going to be some fun," prophesied Harwood.

Chapter IV

BUT Bob was determined that his own personal duty should not be foiled. He waited till the sights came on, as *Gannet* for the second time crossed the boat, and there was just the opportunity to empty another fusillade. Already the boat's floorboards were awash, and the sea was pouring in more rapidly now.

"The Z-rays have stopped," he was congratulating himself, when Harwood gave him the right explanation.

"On the contrary, they're fully active: but I've learnt one important fact. The mechanism is so fastened down that the rays work only in the direction where the boat is pointing. That's why I've been keeping *Gannet* astern of them: that's why they've not burnt you both again."

"In theory we should all be dead men," Wilmer suggested.

"So we should: in actual fact," Harwood confirmed, "but for two things. We flashed

through the danger-zone too quickly; and we were too near. These rays have, so to speak, to focus themselves. Still, it was a cunning idea to send this boat adrift."

"Looked to me every bit like the genuine article."

"She is: bet your life she belonged to some vessel already sunk. Look—there's the name on her bows: S. S. *Almera*. The Rovers knew that the Fastnet men would give the warning as soon as the sun rose: and the first ship to get within fair range of the boat's bows would suffer punishment. That's why the monoplane is hovering about—waiting to get the loot."

Bob's gaze suddenly caught sight of something in the water.

"Looks like a drogue over the stern."

"A conical-shaped canvas drogue," agreed Harwood. "Clever crooks! That's to ensure the boat steering a steady course across the steamer track. See that kind of forestay sup-

porting the mast? Of course it's sheer bluff: merely the transmitter of the Z-rays."

"Well, she'll do no more harm now," Bob ejaculated. For at that moment the riddled boat, weighted by the heavy mechanism, gradually disappeared with a gurgle to the bottom.

"Watch out," came the Skipper's next order, as from a white fluffy cloud there emerged a red monoplane.

"Amphibian!" the critical observation of Wilmer summed up immediately. The unusual design interested him. Gaunt and deadly she seemed, with a bow more like a battleship, but there was no denying her speed.

Out of the sky the enemy came hurtling down with a terrifying roar, punctuated by the sharp burst of fire from her guns.

Harwood turned round in his cockpit, but it was difficult to see aft from that angle. Bob, however, had noticed barely in time.

"He's trying to smash our tail," he warned excitedly. "He's swinging across now. Jove!"

"That's near 'nough," shouted Wilmer. For at the last second had the Skipper banked and swerved out of range. The red amphibian had missed the triple rudders and swept on, but now she was steadying for another attack, as machine guns spluttered angrily.

"Three guns to our one," Bob exclaimed with indignation. "Yes, he has. See—couple of them are firing from aft."

Gannet made a sharp right hand turn, and then by a quick manœuvre was temporarily in a superior tactical position.

"Height to a flying-boat," the Skipper remarked confidently, "is what having the weather-gauge meant in battles of the old sailing-ship days. Now's your chance, Bob."

The boy required no telling twice. Sweeping the handy gun first right, then left, and maintaining the correct amount of depression, he was pouring a heavy hail at the red craft. Wilmer was busily employed slipping in tray after tray of ammunition, but he snatched a

moment to see that the Rovers were now in a tight corner: Harwood had throttled down to such a speed as to keep the enemy excellently placed as a target.

Already one of the latter's stern guns had been silenced, and it was easy to notice the ripped gashes where Bob's good marksmanship had done its work. There was an incredible thrill as the duel continued this late evening, tearing through space at something over 200 miles an hour.

"We've got him," Harwood shouted in encouragement: "keep it up, boys, a bit longer."

And then a most unfortunate incident happened at the worst moment. Bob's gun jammed.

Furiously Wilmer worked with him to get it clear, but *Gannet's* luck seemed to have forsaken her.

"Hurry up! Sun's sinking, and we can't waste time."

It was useless for the Skipper to urge them against the impossible.

"Oh, bother the beastly thing!" Both boys were exasperated with fate's unkindness. Fingernails became chipped, pocket knives became blunted. The tray was immovable.

And then, to crown all, there rose from the hot sea surface one of those summer mists that so often creep up at the day's end.

From Mizzen Head they could hear the fog signals exploding at regular intervals; and somewhere to seaward a big liner was growling with her siren.

At the very announcement from the boys that at last the gun was again in commission, Harwood, his eyes now glued to his instruments, knew that it was too late.

"Rovers have got away," he had to admit. His air sense told him that forthwith the enemy had availed themselves of the approaching fog, steered to meet it, and then

turned aside. Darkness began to settle down as if to complete the impossibility of victory.

"Rotten luck!" grumbled the three venturers, and Harwood eased the great bird down to a gentle 100-knot cruising speed. For the next five hours it was decided to patrol up and down this western approach of the British Isles. Harwood's theory was that at dawn renewed attacks would be made on the American trade-route, and he hoped to be in a favourable position to surprise the Rovers by following up astern of the first ship.

Soon after midnight, however, there came a wireless call from Admiral Rawlyn seated in his office at Whitehall:

"Direction-finding stations indicate that Rover's plane is passing down Bay of Biscay. Suspect he is changing his area to the South Atlantic. You are to proceed Gibraltar and await orders. Meanwhile report further incidents."

Wilmer was in his bunk asleep when Bob

came off watch and brought the news. Cheers echoed round the arched saloon at the thought of further contests.

"It's a feather in our cap that at least we've driven the Black Handers from the most obvious area," Bob enthused.

"But what I don't understand," argued the other, "is what became of the Surrey three-seater, and where did the red amphibian come from?"

"Yes: that puzzles the Skipper. Another thing—had the Rovers a depot ship waiting about up an Irish creek? Skipper wanted to search every lonely bay: if it hadn't been for this Admiralty message."

Wilmer's brain was reasoning with quick decision. "The Black Handers are limited by their fuel supply. Unless they've got our secret type of engines, there must be either bases or vessels where she can fill up."

Bob demurred. "Portsmouth was too wide-awake to let anyone get away with the design,

and I hardly think our enemy would organise floating depots."

"Well—we shall see," Wilmer yawned and turned over to finish his sleep. The comfortable bunk, the fresh ozone, and the day's excitement had combined to make drowsiness no longer resistible.

"Your watch begins at 4 a.m., old chap. I'll come below to call you."

"Fine!" said Wilmer, and then dozed off to unconsciousness. *Gannet's* engines purred with soothing regularity. The night sped on.

There was a strange and indefinable fascination about that six-hundred mile trip across to Cape Finisterre, where the Spanish coast was first sighted whilst Wilmer was in control. It all seemed so delightful that within a short night the locality could be so readily changed. A thick rain squall came and passed; the warm sun burst through, lighting up a magnificent coast.

"There's Vigo," Harwood was pointing to

a long deep bay within the Cies Islands. How entrancing the thickly-wooded, hilly shores looked this morning! The clear atmosphere, the light northerly wind, the inviting inlets, the occasional fisherman or South African liner, the cream-like frothy seas foaming round the rocks—all made up one amazing picture.

Skirting the Portuguese shore, then flying low to get a view of sunlit Lisbon and the sparkling Tagus, *Gannet* had left Drake's favourite Cape St. Vincent by high noon.

"If only those funny old Elizabethan ships could see our blue flying-boat . . . !" Bob began proudly. "This twentieth century," Wilmer argued, "with all its triumphs over sea and air, makes the sixteenth as out of date as flint instruments. I wouldn't change places. No, sir."

Harwood was thinking of Nelson's fleet going into battle under stuns'ls, as *Gannet* darted arrow-like past Trafalgar with the mountains of Morocco now visible ahead.

Soon after six that lovely evening, to the consternation of a P. & O. steamer from Bombay and the signalman on the bridge of a destroyer, the great seabird swooped from the sky, planed down and went taxiing along Gibraltar's harbour in the direction of the dockyard.

"Now, boys," the Skipper in the steering cockpit reminded them, "smart seamanship, please! And don't forget the eyes of Navy and Merchantmen are watching us. That's our buoy."

The destroyer bluejacket, resting his telescope on the bridge rail, was certain that *Gannet* at that speed was destined for a devastating collision, and said so. Engines were shut off, yet still she went scuttering over the smooth water, leaving astern a long white streak. But standing on the after side of the lower plane, to port and starboard, were Wilmer and Bob, each with a stout canvas cone secured to its rope.

"Ready the drogues," ordered the Skipper.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Then—leggo!"

Two splashes synchronised exactly, the conical checks streamed out well astern, and stopped the craft within a few feet of the mooring buoy selected.

"Make fast!"

A span of wire was passed through its iron ring by Bob, the other end was immediately made fast to a bollard in *Gannet's* bows, and the great bird was secured.

"'Struth! Ten seconds from full speed ahead to stop and belay! Seamanship or airmanship," Higgin (beginning to examine the motors) overheard the destroyer's signalman remark to an A.B., "that's the smartest evolution I ever did see."

And simultaneously the same Higgin recognised in him an old shipmate of the *Royal George* times.

"That's nothing," he winked across. "This 'ere *Gannet's* not been commissioned two days.

We've not settled down. But you wait, m'lad! I'm not boasting—I'm only telling yer: if you was to know one 'arf of what we *could* do, it'd make you jealous."

A few minutes later came a naval motor-boat along the sea-gull's starboard side.

"Admiral's compliments, sir," saluted the coxswain, "and will you come ashore at once?"

It was a curious sensation thus again to tread solid ground. Fit and exhilarated, already sun-tanned, Harwood and the two boys had barely stepped ashore than a figure in blue and gold met them at the stone steps.

"I'm afraid," greeted Admiral Codrington, the Commander-in-Chief, "you'll think me too inhospitable after your fine flight. I was looking forward to your dining with me. But read this signal from Whitehall."

Harwood fingered the flimsy document.

"Steamship *Almera* sunk off the Fastnet

. . . oiltanker *Parafol* captured off Vigo. . . .
What's that mean, sir?"

"It means that the Rovers sighted her at dawn, flashed the fatal ray past her, ordered her to follow into one of those unfrequented Spanish inlets under penalty of being set on fire. . . ."

"Yes?" the Skipper seemed to hold his breath in excitement.

"She had been warned by wireless of this marauding airplane and was hugging the coast."

"There was no escape?"

"She was full of gasoline for our submarines. Rather than be set on fire with the loss of ship, cargo and all hands. . . ."

"Surrendered?"

"The red amphibian came alongside the anchored tanker, kept two machine guns pointed at the bridge, demanded a hose pipe to be put over the side and as much gasoline to be pumped into the tanks as the airplane

could hold. That done, ropes were cast off, and away the enemy flew."

"Which direction, sir?" Bob inquired.

"The *Parafol's* master says she went about S.W."

"I understand exactly," said Harwood, biting his lip. "That means the Azores. Goodness! But the Rovers know their business perfectly. They can't help meeting valuable ships thereabouts. And to think the Black Handers only just got away before we came on the scene."

"How soon will you be ready to proceed?" the Commander-in-Chief wanted to know. "I'm sending you off the fuel-boat, and a couple more quickfirers as requested."

Wilmer's face lit up at this gratifying news.

"We're anxious to get away at once," came the prompt answer, "we've got ample oil for these economical motors. In that respect we're the better aircraft."

"Never mind! Fill up to the utmost limit.

There's no telling when another chance will present itself. Good-bye and good luck to you all."

Three-quarters of an hour later, the sugar-loafed rock of Gibraltar saw the wide-winged *Gannet* rise grandly into the evening sky, and disappear over the lonely Atlantic towards the setting sun.

"Brother airmen," Harwood summoned the boys into the saloon, as the coasts of Europe and Africa rapidly dipped into dim obscurity, and Higgin temporarily took over control, "I've thought out our plans, and with luck we ought to be in time. Here's the big idea. Listen!"

Chapter V

"Got both my ears adjusted," answered Wilmer, with excitement born of suspense. "Go right ahead, Skip'. We're both listening-in."

"Well, it's like this," Harwood thrust the Atlantic chart before them. "Gibraltar to Azores—one thousand miles. It's no use going full out: we're doing about 150 just now."

Bob made a few figures with his pencil on the back of the chart. "Then we should be over the Azores by two in the morning. Well?"

"There's a good moon till three-fifteen. It's my belief the Black Handers have a secret base of some sort about here," the master-mariner indicated with the sharp point of his pair of compasses.

But Wilmer insisted on reasons for that assumption.

"See all those lines focusing themselves on

these islands? Those are the steamship-routes from Boston and New York to the Mediterranean; West Indies to the English Channel; South America to Liverpool. . . .”

“I savvy,” Bob realised. “You mean that anyone out to damage shipping couldn’t help succeeding hereabouts?”

“Of course! It was off the Azores that our Elizabethan ancestors in their funny old three-masters used to wait for days. But sooner or later the Spanish treasure-ships would come along. Yes: geography never changes, nor does strategy.”

Wilmer, too, was convinced. The markings on the chart, showing America-to-Europe traffic-lanes, demonstrated that this lonely archipelago was a key-position.

“And, unless the enemy have our patent engines, they’ve got to do one of two things—either keep on waylaying oiltankers, or else work in conjunction with their own supply vessels.”

Wilmer laid the parallel rulers so that Mexico was connected with Cornwall.

"Gee! Some of our Green Funnel tankers steam this way: here we have the Azores slick on their track. That looks to me too bad."

"Except just this—the Black Handers can't afford to wait. Drake's craft were self-contained, time had no value in those days. Our enemy was a bit lucky to have caught the *Parafol*, but among the daily list of ships you mustn't reckon to sight an oiltanker always," added the Skipper.

"That brings us to the second alternative," Bob summed up. "There's a rendezvous at some spot at present unknown, where the red amphibian can fuel and overhaul."

"The question," Wilmer put in, "is which of the group is the more likely."

"Obviously the one that has no inhabitants; where the Black Handers can work without being reported. And San Pedro Island, according to this book of 'Sailing Directions' is

without a soul, except for an occasional whaler calling," Harwood proved to them.

"It's our duty to examine San Pedro," the boys were now convinced. "We get the idea: you mean to surprise them before sunrise?"

"Some time after the moon has set," the Skipper agreed: "but before that we must do some scouting. We may find what we want—or we may not. Turn in, both of you, and get sleep whilst you can. At midnight I'll send Higgin to call you."

The steady purring of *Gannet's* engines, the good sea air, and the eventful day combined to send both young aviators into dreamland quickly. Through the velvety sky the wonderful sea-bird sped into the lonely Atlantic. Occasionally the masthead lights of a liner coming up from South Africa or Cape Horn would be revealed like tiny dots and then fade away.

With remarkable quickness the four hours

seemed to have passed when Higgin's voice suddenly woke them to full consciousness.

"Began to think you was dead. Lumme! Talk about sleeping! Like a nice cup o' cocoa? Very good, sir. Just ten minutes to twelve, and a fine night."

He had vanished by the time Bob emerged yawning from a warm sleeping-bag.

As the two boys sat presently in the middle cockpit munching ship's biscuits and keeping *Gannet* dead on the compass course, a strange fascination seemed to come over them: a curious thrill of delight. The spell of sea and star-bright sky, the moonlight flicking the tops of waves, the glowing bulb illuminating the compass-card, the sense of exhilaration—all united to create a consciousness that this was a cruise far superior to anything their minds had ever contemplated.

"Reminds me," Wilmer broke the silence as he buttoned his leather coat more closely, "of old man Columbus, and his *Santa Maria*.

I guess he felt lonesome enough when he lost sight of Spain. My! But this *Gannet* can cert'nly travel."

"It's the first time in the history of the world that fellows of our age have done what you and I are doing. You've not forgotten that, Wilmer?"

"Why, sure! Even Lindbergh would call us kids."

"I was just thinking of centuries ago. Imagine being blown out of the Mediterranean by an easterly gale and giving up all hope."

"Pretty tough!"

"Weeks later the Azores suddenly looming up and real land, Wilmer!"

"Must've looked pretty good, I'll say."

Way down below at a distance of a thousand feet the moon's rays shone upon a sailing-ship's canvas. To Bob's eyes, as he watched the swaying spars, the green and red sidelights, and the yellow gleam from the deck-

house aft, the picture was unforgettable. Soon this recollection would belong to antiquity.

The Air Age would soon conquer steam, as steam had surpassed sail. Oh, but it was great fun to be a pioneer in the sky!

From the saloon the clock on the after bulk-head chimed soothingly.

"Three bells! Half past one! Should see the islands before long."

Bob nodded his helmeted head, and began humming a home-made air-chantey he had learned from the Skipper:

"Oh! I wish I had a flying-boat with solid
golden planes;

With diadems and topazes and silver cable
chains.

I'd sweep her through the Tropics, and burst
her through the Trades;

I'd let the wild Atlantic know she's . . ."

But suddenly Harwood came up into the cockpit, and began using his binoculars.

“Good! Excellent landfall! St. Michael’s is just on our starboard bow. Let me relieve you.”

Gradually, as the speed accelerated, there was silhouetted up against the moon a rugged hilly line, and then the coast leapt towards them. A warm land wind, laden with the sweet smell of flowers, came off St. Michael’s, and then Horta showed up beneath their feet. *Gannet* planed down to get a close view.

“San Pedro Island!” Wilmer hazarded as the mighty bird turned off to the right.

“That’s the place! Stand by! Get to your stations! Hallo, hallo! See what’s lying there? Inside that little promontory . . . on the beach . . . just above water-mark?”

The moon glinted on a smooth surface and disappeared behind a cloud.

Bob nudged Wilmer in the ribs. Two young hearts began beating rapidly.

“Airplane! Give me those glasses—yes, a big black hand. That’s her.”

“Hsh!” Harwood shut off the engine and

planed downwards. "Talk in a whisper. Be on your guard. Act promptly. I'm bringing up to leeward of the headland, where they can't hear us: in those deep shadows, where we shan't be seen. Ready the drogues?"

Two heads moved forward. The great *Gannet* slid over the leaden waters.

"Anchor all clear? Then leggo! Make fast!"

"All fast, sir."

As Harwood simultaneously came out from behind the wind-screen and removed his goggles, he motioned them to follow him below.

"Boys, are you willing to risk your lives for the good of humanity, for the safety of the world's shipping?" There was a deep seriousness in his lowered intonation.

"Whatever you order, Skipper, that we obey," Bob answered instantly.

"Why, of course," added Wilmer. "Something exciting! You bet."

"You quite understand? This is no cotton-

wool job." He paused to allow that warning to sink in deeply. Then, "The Black Handers are probably sleeping till dawn before they're off to harass the trade-routes. They've not suspected us, or we should have felt the death-rays."

"I believe that," agreed Wilmer.

"I want you both to swim ashore, feel your way across that little peninsula, creep up the beach, set the amphibian on fire, shoot the first man who attacks you, but aim at his legs so as only to disable him. Got that?"

"And then?"

"Back to this dark headland and our shore. Here's a whistle, Bob. Give one blast as soon as you're both about to swim back. I'll answer it with continuous flashes on this electric torch—every fifteen seconds."

"So that we can find *Gannet*. I understand perfectly," Bob appreciated.

"Here's an automatic, each. Yours, Wilmer, has eight incendiary cartridges: but one shot

should set the enemy's petrol-tanks on fire; the rest are for damaging his rudders and firing down the hatches."

"What about the propellers?"

"Propellers—ah, that's smart of you. Find a handy lump of stone and smash their blades. That's the way to cripple them. And you, Bob, will puncture the amphibian's fuselage just as you will any man who interferes. Higgin will wrap each automatic in a bit of old oil-skin. Meanwhile shed everything but shirt, trousers and rubber shoes."

Five minutes later, with a final glance at the chart, both boys, with a small bundle tied over the head, dropped gently into the dark water.

"Good luck, sir," Higgin had wished them individually. "And I hopes you come back safely."

"And don't forget to whistle," the Skipper reminded them again.

Two lithe swimmers doing a powerful side

stroke were quickly overcoming the seventy yards that separated them from the shore. Harwood had rightly surmised there would be no current in this horse-shoe bay, but the pitch-black moonless land was a little difficult to locate. After the first few strokes Bob had lost Wilmer, and then came another surprise.

“Ugh! Steep-to! Must have turned left,” Bob realised, as he found himself against a bit of precipitous, sharp rock. Three times he essayed to raise himself up that jagged projection, but each time it defeated him.

He was getting tired, his arms ached, his flannel trousers were a heavy drag. For a moment he tried to hang on to a slippery ledge for a brief rest, peering through the night this way and that.

And then he managed to separate shadow from shore: he was only at the southern tip of the promontory. Too far west! Yards out of his course!

Another five anxious minutes, and by following the rocks he came to the spot where his

feet touched the shelving beach, and he removed the automatic from his bandaged head. But Wilmer?

Not a sound stirred the silent obscurity. As soon as he had tucked up to the knees his dripping trousers, Bob put his ear to ground.

Nothing! Only the sudden slight backwash of a miniature wave licking the pebbles. He dared not shout; to whistle would have given a false signal. Had Wilmer been caught with cramp and been drowned? Or was there a tide after all?

And then something made Bob's heart beat faster still. He had forgotten the possibility of sentries and lookouts.

Something moving about the beach? A heavy tread. He could hardly keep from shouting, as it came nearer and nearer. A man's clumsy footsteps? He could even *feel* him approaching. And then he side-stepped suddenly. Bob felt his body arrested by a sharp collision.

"Who goes there?" came the quick demand, and the boy gripped tight his automatic.

Chapter VI

"WHY, it's me! Wilmer speaking. If we weren't both as wet as water-rats, you'd have guessed. Say, Bob, quit this fool game. You scared me stiff. I've been lying on my stomach beyond that rock thinking you were gone."

"Same here. How's everything?"

"Fine! We sure have been swimming round like goldfish in a glass bowl. Now for the fun!"

For precaution against further chance of being separated, they joined hands and mounted the slight rise of the neck-of-land that joined the cove to the beach where a big amphibian's form was indefinitely coming into sight at the junction of land and water.

Once Wilmer stopped and stooped to select a long thin oval-shaped boulder, and then making sure that no vigilant outpost was around, they tip-toed onwards. A gentle, warm breeze was coming down and shaking the tall cedars on the cliffs above, and it was just pos-

sible to discern the opening of a glen where the Black Handers had chosen their resting-place.

"Better buck up," Bob suggested. "We've lost valuable time, and dawn can't be such a long way off."

"Hst!" Wilmer whispered. "Was that someone talk . . . ? I swear I heard voices."

But Bob disagreed. "You're imagining things. Ever heard trees rustle before?"

It was just as they had traversed a sandy patch and were within ten yards of the amphibian, that simultaneously dawn broke behind the promontory and Bob burst into a quick run.

"They're hauling off," he pointed. "She's sliding down the beach. Must be high water now, and they've got a stern anchor well out in the bay. Never mind! It's hit or miss."

Light was quickly returning to the Azores, just as the Black Handers were again beginning their day's nefarious work. Suddenly

the man in the stern spotted the surprising figures of two bedraggled boys. In the next moment he was mowing the sand with a nasty fusillade from his quickfirer.

“Three propellers! She’s starting up! If I could only get one of them!” Wilmer yearned.

Lying on the ground behind a ridge of sand, Bob’s automatic was directed at the stern, when from the bows there opened a drenching fire, but simultaneously something went hurtling through the air and caught the nearest propeller with such nicety that it was smashed to tiny pieces.

“Jolly good, Wilmer! Bravo!”

Relieved of its load, the engine at this side raced with terrible whirring till one of the three men brought it to a stop. Anger—bitter and uncurbed—rent the morning air just as Wilmer again aimed at the rudder, this time with little effect.

“All metal—like ours. No luck. Nothing to set on fire. Oh, for another stone!” Wilmer

looked everywhere among the sands. But just then the other two engines stopped and the hauling-off rope went slack.

“Bob, we’ve got to beat it! Sure!”

Two men, one short and stumpy, leapt and waded through the water, the former armed with a heavy revolver. The other, sallow-faced, lanky and with a fierce moustache, followed with a light machine-gun, which, at every few steps, he began aiming. Once a shot from Bob’s automatic caused the first man to halt and hesitate; a second missed; but the boy’s third, being more deliberately levelled, grazed the stumpy fellow’s right instep and made him hop about the beach with an expression of concentrated wrath.

Wilmer tried another incendiary effort, but there resulted only a short little blaze, and the mechanic examining the ruined propeller kicked the fire with his foot from the plane into the rising water.

“Back to the *Gannet*,” Bob concurred. Auto-

matics were emptying, but the enemy was now more active, his fire more concentrated, and the smaller man had recovered from his bruised foot.

"We'll be mighty lucky if we do get back," Wilmer was thinking, though he kept his thoughts to himself just then. "Separate! Spread out!" he wisely suggested. "They'll get one of us, if we keep together much longer."

It was full light now, and the neck-of-land was gained. Keeping close to the cedars, Wilmer raced on like a stag, as Bob went zig-zagging towards the beach. How the bullets failed to find their two targets even then was miraculous.

"Got the whistle? Blow like mad."

But as Bob felt for the lanyard round his neck, and looked seawards, his heart sank within him. Only a few yards separated the two young aviators from the enraged Black Handers, and already the previous exertions

were beginning to make Wilmer not less fatigued than Bob, when the former gasped in horror.

"She's gone! *Gannet's* disappeared. We're done for."

He was out of breath. He could scarcely speak.

"Gone? Don't you believe it. That's the early morning mist. I've got a rough bearing. She's not far off, but we've jolly well got to hustle. Swim for it."

Wilmer bent and halted. His hand was against his side.

"Can't go another inch . . . you carry on alone . . . it's stitch . . . just a pain, but . . ."

Bob took in the situation and temporised. Protecting the bent figure with his own, Bob swung round and emptied his automatic at the two pursuers so as to cause the latter to hide behind a rock. For one tense, full minute the issue remained in doubt, till Wilmer raised his shoulders and smiled.

"Okay!" he said. "Pain vanished! Everything okay."

"Then make for *Gannet* whilst the going's good. I'll keep 'em off till you're a dozen yards from the beach."

And, in spite of Wilmer's protestations, Bob did so. The last cartridge had been spent, but the enemy was not to realise that. Already the short man had the highest regard for Bob's markmanship, whilst the other was torn between indignation that Wilmer was swimming away, and the fear that Bob was delaying only to sharpshoot the first head that should show above the rock's security.

"Do it now!"

The notion was instantly obeyed. With a shrill whistle, Bob ran to the water and began to strike out desperately rather than accurately. Several well-placed shots spattered in the sea around his head, but the mist soon raised a sheltering screen.

"That's that," he congratulated himself. "Now for Wilmer and *Gannet*."

But in that woolly atmosphere he could find neither. Round and forwards he travelled, yet there was nothing save this choking fog. And then the awful thought half paralysed him. What if he had missed *Gannet* altogether? What if he had got to seaward of her, where the Atlantic current swept on towards Europe?

He stopped swimming and lay on his back. Panic tempted him, gripped him. He thrust it from him with an effort, but there he was with the awful problem still unsolved. If only the fog would lift, at least he would know his impending fate.

He could feel his strength failing him. In spite of the hot, sultry morning he was already getting chilly. A gull swept by out of nowhere, inspected him and passed on.

Once the thought came to Bob that it would have been best had he surrendered to the

Black Handers and chanced his fate. But immediately he fought down this thought, too.

"Better to die fighting with death, than submit to the enemy ignominiously."

His hand caught the cotton-rope lanyard at his neck and flashed a thought straight to his brain. A futile attempt to dally with the inevitable? Perhaps. Still

He blew the whistle with all his might. Listened. Voices! Blew once more. Listened again. This time he was stark certain. Higgin's voice! The Skipper's voice!

Weakly he swam, as he thought, towards them, but fog plays curious pranks, and the cliffs created echoes. And then, after a few strokes, something harsh hit his head.

Bob looked up. Incredible!

"*Gannet*, ahoy!"

"Aye, aye! (It's Bob's voice, Higgin.) Where are you?"

"Not half a dozen yards away," came the

boy's answer. "I'm holding on to the anchor rope. If you could only haul up a bit. . . ."

Bob almost collapsed. The strain had been too much, he could only release his hand and slip the taut rope under his arm.

"Smart's the word!" he could recognise the Skipper encouraging. But the manilla cable was merely searing the boy's flesh; the crook of his arm was little better than a fair-lead, till *Gannet* herself, impelled a few yards by all this hauling, brought her shapely round bow abreast of Bob's head.

Another couple of seconds, and Higgin had helped him inboard.

"Where's Wilmer? I did my best, but . . . "

"Wilmer's below having breakfast. You'd better change into pyjamas and do the same."

"But the Black Handers. . . ."

"You've had a hard time. Make your report later."

"And the red amphibian! If you'll taxi

round the headland, it's a sitting shot. Wilmer did one of the propellers in."

"Eh?"

"You'll have to be quick, Skipper. She'll be well afloat now. But you'll need all three guns. She's still able to use two engines: she'll certainly get away from us."

Harwood was hesitating a moment. To negotiate on the water of a strange fog-bound coast, to run straight into the enemy's lair, seemed scarcely prudent.

Suddenly, as he stood, a solitary figure, on the metal deck, he gave a leap into the air. Bob, on his way to breakfast, looked up through the cockpit and roared with laughter. Had the Skipper gone frantically mad?

There was a black scar across Harwood's chin, his goggles were cracked and his leather coat gashed as if from a hot iron.

"The Z-rays!" he exclaimed, rubbing his jaw painfully. "The red airplane is trying to find us. Time to seek out the Black Handers?"

Up anchor, Higgin; start all engines. I'll teach the crooks a lesson."

Higgin was keeping a keen look-out at the edge of the starboard wing-tip, guiding the Skipper sufficiently clear of the mist-flecked rocks, as *Gannet* glided over the smooth sea in a series of rushes.

Before she was in line with the glen, Wilmer had rushed up from the saloon and taken his place in the foremost cockpit, with his finger on the gun's trigger. Bob had barely bolted a mouthful of bacon and eggs before he ran the whole length of the saloon and was ready with the stern gun. No one spoke a syllable. Higgin was waving his hand, and Harwood kept stealing a glance at the chart.

And then a mighty roar came down the freshening wind.

"There she goes! That's the red amphibian," all four seemed to exclaim at once.

Harwood opened the throttle with a jerk,

checked her course firmly with the rudder, and once more *Gannet* climbed into the air.

It was a hard task now to infer how the enemy was heading: it was assumed that the latter was circling around for the blue flying-boat, intent on giving the knockout blow. But just as a very weak flash of the rays swept past *Gannet's* bows, and the mist thickened seaward, the rapidly rising sun cleared beach and glen.

"Gone away!" the boys pointed to the empty beach. But the crackling cedars, being fanned into a brisk fire, significantly proved the Z-rays' terrible power.

The matter of how next to proceed was not easy to decide. East, west, north or south? Where had the airplane gone?

"It's my firm belief," Higgin volunteered, "that she'll come back again. She meant to use that cove as her own."

"Possibly you're right," the Skipper conceded. "But I'm equally convinced she's too

frightened to return. One thing—we've messed up her plans."

"How's that, sir?"

"Clear as sunlight! She'll need fuel—she was waiting for her supply-ship to come along. This out-of-the-way, yet conveniently placed cove was ideal."

Wilmer snatched at the idea. "You've settled that point, then? There's a surface vessel hanging around somewhere?"

"Whom the Black Handers call up by wireless. It's a clever stunt. The German raiders did it during the Great War. I'm just getting alive to the marvellous, ingenious resourcefulness of our rivals. It's going to be hard to beat men with such brains."

"But with tanks half empty, and one propeller gone, you don't think they'll get far?" argued the incredulous Bob.

Harwood smiled. "Always give your enemy the credit of doing what you could do. The supply-ship may have buried tins of fuel up

the glen, which the amphibian filled up with last night. And don't you believe she carries a couple of spare propellers in her hull?"

There was no contradicting that.

But at this precise moment a ticking from the wireless-room summoned the boys below.

Seven minutes later, Bob came up with a signal pad.

"Message just come through from 'Room 909,' relayed through Gibraltar. Shall I read it aloud?"

"Please."

"Following facts now established. Leader of Black Handers is Professor Kenthal late of Vienna University. Tall, sallow, fierce moustache. Worldwide organisation revealed. Six oil-tankers crossing Atlantic now overdue. Their daily positions not wirelessly for over a week. Sinister influence suspected and crews overpowered by Kenthal's agents signed on at last ports. Suspect all light cruisers. The old *Cockatrice* on her way to be broken up on

the Clyde captured off S.W. Ireland, and believed to be steaming south. All aerodromes being watched by military, but a new sea-plane disappeared last night from off builders' yard up the Thames. Direction-finding stations at Gibraltar and Sierra Leone fix amphibian south of St. Michael's heading S.E."

Wilmer scratched the back of his head and began to expand the compressed sentences.

"If that isn't a mouthful! There's enough trouble to keep a bunch of navies working overtime for a whole year. Skip', how does it get you?"

Harwood looked unusually solemn.

"I won't say we've bitten off more than we can chew, but 'nine-nought-nine' seems to have given us plenty to go on with. Professor? Ah! Hence the brains. Worldwide . . . agents."

"We'll beat the lot," put in Bob cheerily, still eating.

"It's plain to me," the master mariner con-

cluded, "that Kenthal is making for Las Palmas."

"Or the mail steamers with diamonds and gold from South Africa," Bob fingered the chart.

"Or a nice quiet river between Sierra Leone and the coast of Morocco," Wilmer preferred. He was calling to mind the days when pirates came out from here across the path of seventeenth century ships bound to the West Indies. "Wouldn't that be a good little place for the amphibian's supply-ship?" he pointed to an indentation where the chart said Río de Oro.

Harwood's face lit up.

"A brain wave! I fancy you've solved part of the difficulty. If the Black Handers were really waiting at San Pedro, after calling up one captured tanker, Río de Oro is just another likely spot for a ship to hide."

"Why so, Skipper?" Bob enquired.

"Not merely because this Spanish bit of

Africa is never visited, but because it's bang on the Cape Town trade-route. These old pirates were right: they knew. And what's more—come to think of it—Río de Oro is that unfrequented roadstead where the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* hid herself.”

Both boys looked puzzled.

“You won't remember that incident. Happened in the Great War. She was an armed merchant-cruiser—used to run from Germany to New York—sank some of our steamers in 1914 and then hoped to conceal herself.”

“And did she?”

“For a few days—till H. M. S. *Highflyer* steamed in and caught her coaling from her supply-ship *Duala*. The *Kaiser Wilhelm* now lies at the bottom of that bay where the cruiser sank her. But two million dollars' worth of British shipping had also been sunk.”

The keen young aviators were thrilled by this historical sidelight. And the longing to “bring Río de Oro into line with modern trans-

portation"—as Wilmer neatly expressed it—set their imaginations tingling with anticipated delight.

"Course sou'east," the Skipper handed over the controls to Bob and went below to fill his pipe. "Keep your eyes scanning the sea and let me know when Teneriffe shows up. Wilmer," he summoned, "let nothing surprise you from the sky. Be especially careful to look astern and aloft. And remember this: the *Cockatrice* has anti-aircraft guns."

Wilmer and Bob pondered over the inference.

An hour later Bob gave a start and called his companion's attention to an object two thousand feet below on the surface of the sea.

In a flash of activity he was calling down the telephone to Harwood's cabin.

"You're wanted on deck. Quick, please. Look! Look what's below."

Wilmer held his breath in wild excitement.

Chapter VII

"BY JOVE, that's strange," Harwood had to agree. He was examining the object fore-and-aft critically as *Gannet* temporarily eased down and hovered above.

"That's the *Cockatrice*: name's on her stern," Bob exclaimed in the excitement of discovery.

"It's the old cruiser right 'nough," Harwood further conceded. "Funny-looking crowd on board, I will say. Lot of toughs they seem to me. Hallo! Hallo! What have we now?"

Immediately from out of clear space a red dragonfly shot into view and wheeled round to follow the ex-cruiser's course. Wilmer, in his up-to-the-minute knowledge, had just called attention to the fact *Cockatrice* was no longer armed with guns on her after deck. "Guess they hadn't time to land the others before reaching the Clyde," he surmised.

"Well—if that doesn't beat the best!" Bob

was taken by surprise. "The Black Handers! But it's jolly fine airmanship! They've done it safely—they've landed on the cruiser's quarter-deck."

Harwood was unable to conceal his admiration, but it amazed him that so large an aircraft could gently and quietly alight in so restricted an area.

"Let's have those glasses," Wilmer seized the powerful binoculars. He was silent for a few moments. Then, passing them across the cockpit, he said with the air of conviction: "Thought as much. That Professor Kenthal knows this flying game too well to please me."

"Wha's matter, Wilmer?" It was Bob speaking.

"Matter? Only that those guys are two years ahead of *Gannet*. The amphibian's got some helicopter gadget. Didn't you see her drop vertically? She'd have hit the cruiser's deck with a wallop—otherwise."

It was unnecessary to discuss that im-

portant point further, for two light and slender propellers placed directly above the upper plane, and so designed that when not needed for their special purpose they could be laid in a fore-and-aft non-resisting line, were now observed unmistakably. They ceased revolving and became as imperceptible as they had appeared in San Pedro's bay.

"Full speed!" the Skipper ordered. "Carry on for Río de Oro. It's lucky the red flying-machine had the sun in her eyes. She'd fix us with her Z-rays, otherwise."

"But you're not going to leave here, Skip'? You don't mean to let the cruiser get away?"

Harwood was expecting just that bit of dissatisfaction from two healthy young aviators thirsting for thrill and battle; but, even if his own desire became almost irresistible, his reasoning sense controlled him.

"Did you notice a couple of six-inch guns mounted for'ard in the *Cockatrice*? Did you

also see four high-angle anti-aircraft quick-firers?"

"Sure!" said the vigilant Wilmer.

"If we hang about much longer, they'll concentrate and blow us to pieces no bigger than dust. The Black Handers will then continue their wicked work, and Admiral Rawlyn will wonder why ever he entrusted *Gannet* to such fools as us."

"Well?" both fellows demurred. It was annoying that logic should interfere with adventure and rob them of excitement. Still, Captain Harwood they well knew would never rob them of good times without justification.

"The capture of that once crack cruiser—pride of her squadron—rather makes me think and wonder. Boys, don't misunderstand my intentions, but put yourself in my place. That message from nine-nought-nine proves clearly that Kenthal has plotted no petty pilfering, but something which only a big brain could plan."

"The missing seaplane? The six oil-tankers?"

"Yes, and the impudent daring to steal a cruiser. Of course she'd have only a small navigating party on board, who could easily be cowed into submission. But what a master-mind to have worked this all out in detail!"

"And for it to tick as smoothly as a clock," added Wilmer, now thoroughly converted that a fresh development had come over their voyage.

"Suppose it is rather brilliant," even Bob was led to believe. "Then what's our next move? All the guns we own would be useless against a man-o'-war."

Harwood smiled with a confident significance.

"Precisely," he remarked quickly. "But we, too, have brains—and we also have courage. If Río de Oro reveals what I expect, we shall be able to do far more injury to Kenthal and Co. than by remaining here to give

Cockatrice's scratch crew a target for their shooting."

Gannet zoomed through the azure sky, imparting to her own people that anticipation which is merely the fresh beginning of excitement.

The slight quiver of her body was like that of the flying fish which had been seen leaping. The brilliant sun, the invigorating breeze that *Gannet* was making, the smooth purple sea way down below, kept senses alert to the immediate task.

The Canary Islands jumped out of the Atlantic to meet them, and presently the great bird was flying over a harbour full of ships, beaches fringed with palms and open-fronted shops. The Peak of Teneriffe beckoned like a beacon and was gone.

That afternoon Cape Bojador was beneath their feet, but a hot dry breeze from across the Sahara desert caused so great a thirst that *Gannet's* two youngest voyagers made their

way below into the cool saloon. Higgin had immediately guessed their wants.

"Two large ice-cream sodas? And a slab o' cake each? How's that?"

Bob felt it was worth all the ivory of Africa. Wilmer was too busy with his mouth for any such terse remark: but he nodded his fullest approbation.

"Hurry up when you're through," the Skipper's voice summoned them when they were half way through into a second helping of almond cake. And all hands jumped smartly to action stations as the flying-boat cut across Cape Blanco and planed down.

"Río de Oro—that's our bay," Harwood inclined his gaze. Bob was in the fore cockpit adjusting the sights of his gun, Wilmer was right aft training his gun to starboard and port, and then from behind a tuft of cloud the contents of the great gulf revealed themselves.

"One — two — four ships," Bob counted.

"Wilmer guessed right. Merchantmen—every one."

"Look again," Harwood advised. "The big chap is an obvious tanker."

"Clearly: she's got her engines right aft. The vessel anchored on her starboard quarter must be a collier. . . ."

"Correct! Probably bound from Newcastle or Cardiff for South America. The third fellow? If you examine her bow and stern, you'll find she's a cable-layer."

"Then comes a smaller steamer closer in towards the shore."

Harwood shook his head. "That's the *Tarna*. Saw her launched last time I was on leave. She's one of the new type of Diesel-engined yachts. Straight bow and tug-like stern. Bound across for delivery to her South American millionaire. I read in the 'Morning Mercury' she'd left Southampton."

But just then from the collier there rose a

terrific flash, followed by a sound that resembled the banging of a mammoth drum.

"Look out, Skip'," Wilmer was calling from aft. "She's trained her gun at us. There's a second gun in the well deck abaft the funnel."

Two ugly yellow explosions burst the air just at the point *Gannet* had passed some seconds previously. And now there was another crash just ahead. Harwood dipped the flying-boat and came round in a right-hand turn.

"Stand by, both of you. On the word 'Fire,' both of *Gannet's* guns will aim at the enemy's gun-crew aft. Are you ready?" Harwood was approaching the collier with engines stopped.

"All ready, sir."

Three seconds' interval—then the Skipper's sharp shout.

"Fire at 'em! Blaze away!"

Like tropical rain two streams of lead pattered down on the collier's steel decks. There was a momentary pause as, with throttle ad-

vanced, the huge sea-bird swooped back to hover again, making such an angle with the enemy's gun as to prevent the latter from being aimed.

"Give it 'em once more. Let the pirates have it."

Bob and Wilmer needed no exhorting. Rattle-spat, spat-rattle, spat-rattle . . . the accurate fire came forth without a single hesitation.

Higgin was looking on with delight.

"That's spoilt their little game. Talk about 'three blind mice'—see them running now."

The entire gun's crew had scattered for their lives up the steel ladder, and down the engine-room. Harwood was just about to round up the foremost gunners in the same way, when a bunch of unkempt, cloth-capped, surly-looking scallywags forsook the unhealthy position and darted down the forehatch with such precipitancy, that two of them went head first.

Forthwith ringing cheers rose to the sky.

Bob caught sight of a Mercantile officer in uniform waving from the port side of the oil-tanker.

"Congratulations," read the semaphore message. "Come alongside and I'll lower a boat. I have something to communicate."

Two and a half minutes later *Gannet* came tearing down on to the water abreast of the steamer's bridge and let go anchor.

Already a scuffle was taking place along the tanker's deck, and the bridge was being defended by a mere handful of men, whilst a gang from forward were determined to fight their way aft.

"Cap'n's compliments," the *Petrolene's* Third Officer rowed off alone to *Gannet*. He was anxious, nerve-tightened, but cool. "Bit of a mutiny aboard the *Petrolene* . . . threaten to cut our throats . . . could lend us a hand . . . very much obliged."

Positively there was no waiting. Before

Harwood could even suggest it, Bob and Wilmer had leapt into the boat, seized an oar each, whilst the white-uniformed officer shipped the rudder at the stern.

"Got your automatics?" the latter inquired.
"That's good. Ours have gone west."

"How's that?"

"Crew rushed the bridge; we drove the lot back with our fists and a couple of two-inch spanners from the engine-room. But things have begun to look ugly . . . threatened to cut every officer's throat before the sun goes down. Here we are . . . mind how you go."

Gun in hand, Bob led the way, running up the accommodation-ladder like a terrier. Wilmer joined him at the very moment when the surging, howling mob had succeeded in breaking through and were about to hurl the Captain over the side.

With doubled fist, Bob dealt the ringleader a blow at the back of the right ear in such surprising force that a terrible pointed knife

dropped clattering into the scuppers, and the man stumbled forward dazed.

"Stand back, you Dago dogs," Wilmer improved on the opportunity and jumped in between where Captain, Chief Officer and two Engineers were slowly retreating from the sallow-faced, villainous mob. Whipping out his automatic, he commanded the latter to remain where they stood, or suffer the penalty of disobedience.

The command seemed ridiculous. Who were these two youngsters, anyway? One man at the fringe of the crowd was just cocking a stolen revolver when Bob spotted him. Wilmer was attracted simultaneously, and two handy little weapons were being pointed with extraordinary steadiness at the man's heart. Bob noticed the face of a squinting criminal.

There was a tense stillness for quite half a minute. Several of the front rank involuntarily stepped back and blinked.

"Hand over that revolver," Wilmer demanded.

Not a sign of the man obeying. He was merely insolent and grinning.

"Me no conversation with kids."

The mutineers roared at the joke.

"Very well," insisted Bob. "It's two guns to one. The Captain will count six. At the end of that time, it's free for all, and favour for none. By the look of you, I should say you'd be a fool with that swivel eye and that shaky bunch of fingers, to risk your life. Still, that's your business. Now, Captain; please. . . ."

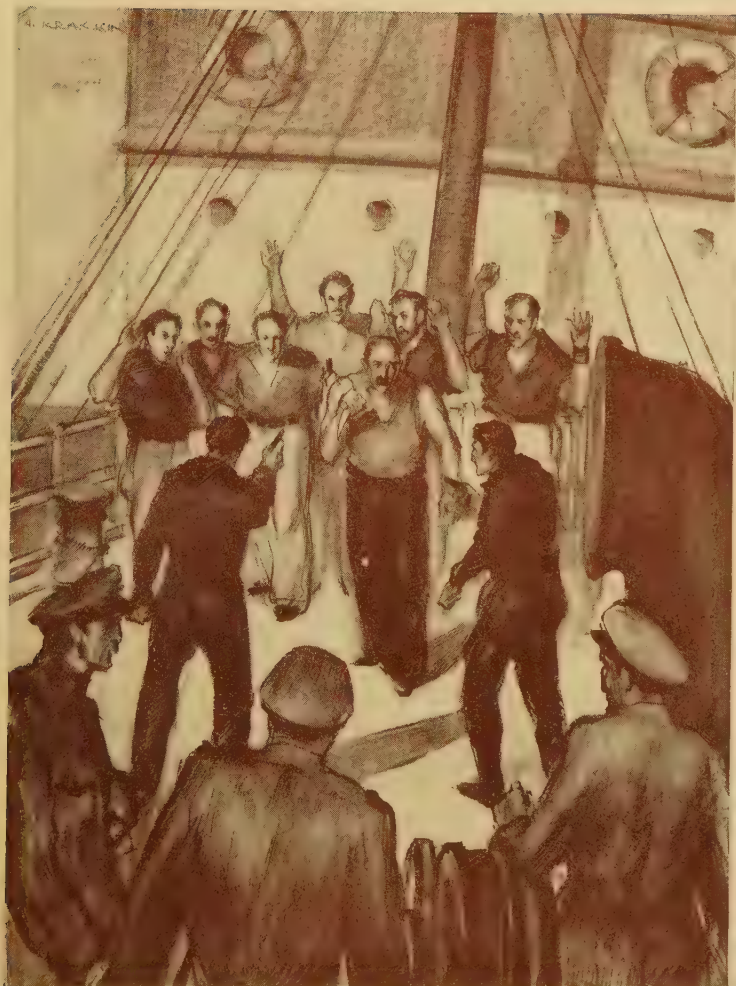
The stout, sun-tanned and worried master of the *Petrolene* began counting the seconds.

"One . . . two. . . ."

"Better stand further back," Wilmer advised the now wavering crowd. "I *have* heard of accidents happening."

"Three . . . four. . . ."

There was a distinct break in the mob. All, save a mere knot of truculent greasers and



"BETTER STAND FURTHER BACK," WILMER ADVISED THE NOW
WAVERING CROWD

seamen retreated down the iron ladder to the further end of the deck.

“Five. . . .”

There was a sudden clatter, as the man dropped his revolver on to the deck and ran with the rest. The *Petrolene’s* master regained his possession, and made a comment to the boys. The crowd were separating in twos and threes, arguing excitedly.

“Before we go any further,” Bob’s voice was raised, “there’s the matter of three more revolvers, stolen from aft, that’ve got to be returned. Time’s getting on. *Gannet*, I notice, has both her guns following you men at every movement. Do you hand over what never was your own? Or will you take the chance?”

Three men engaged in heated discussion, but the language might have as easily been Hindustani, Chinese, or Mexican-Spanish, to the boys.

“The Chief Officer will be pleased to collect

any of those three guns taken—er—by mistake. Hands up, the rest.”

So, preceded by the tall, athletic Mate, the two boys walked along the deck, covering the mutineers whilst the Captain followed up the rear.

Three hands slid into three hip-pockets and produced three heavy revolvers.

“Thank you, men. That’s all. Now go below. The rest of this story will be continued at a later date.”

And so saying, the foc’sle door was slammed, locked, and guarded by the three officers and Chief Engineer.

“We’ll send a wireless to Gibraltar,” the boys promised. “There’ll be a warship coming along soon to lend you a crew and take off the prisoners.”

Even now the corpulent, jolly little Captain could hardly believe that the crisis had so quickly passed.

“I’m sure I really don’t know how to thank

you both," he began. "It's the first experience in all my seafaring life"

"What exactly did happen?" Wilmer wanted to know.

"Before we left Tampico, Gulf of Mexico, every fireman and seaman deserted in one night. Then this gang was signed on. Half way across they seized the ship, took over the wireless, made the engineers do as they were told, and ordered me to make for Río de Oro. There's something at the back of this that we don't understand. They've been getting mysterious messages every few hours."

"But these other three ships?"

"We arrived only this morning. They were here when we came in. Can't understand it all. That Cardiff collier, too. She's fooled me with her two six-inch guns. But you settled her a treat. What's the game? What's happened to the world?"

Bob and Wilmer looked at each other and smiled.

"It's a long story, Captain," Bob began to explain. "That was no ordinary mutiny. These neighbouring ships are all part of a mighty scheme. Your crew were the paid agents of the Black Handers: the *Petrolene* has been brought in to serve as supply-ship to a notorious air-raider. The collier is waiting to go out and work with her. There's a terrible invention called the Z-rays . . ."

"Look at that yacht," he suddenly pointed. "She knows about the rays. Bridge been on fire, deck house burnt out. . . . Now we understand. Yes: I'll come over and meet Cap'n Harwood."

But that visit was destined to be delayed indefinitely.

"Skipper wants us back immediately," Wilmer noticed the recall signal being hoisted by the halyards to the upper plane. "Down to the boat."

And just then they heard the drone of an airplane's engines.

"The Black Handers," they pointed to the sky. "They've reached their base, they're about to fill up with your oil."

The Captain looked up to the cloudless sky.

"Are they? I'll see they don't fool me the second time. Well, good-bye, don't worry about the boat. Give her a shove off, when you've finished."

Harwood was calling through the megaphone.

"Buck up! Buck up! It'll be too late."

Chapter VIII

THERE is always a tendency for a flying-boat to stick on the surface when the sea is a glassy calm, and today at this precious moment in the calm waters of Río de Oro Bay, *Gannet* needed no little airmanship.

What wind there was came from the direction of the anchored ships, whose presence made the area for manoeuvring hereabouts rather awkwardly restricted.

"Take charge of the controls," Harwood gave the super-sea-bird into Bob's hands. "I'm going in the for'ard cockpit with Wilmer. Higgin is right aft with the third gun."

Any trace of nervousness at this crisis was banished by the many considerations which occupied Bob's mind. Three valuable lives in his care, to say nothing of his own sun-tanned skin. And overhead was the red amphibian waiting like a hawk about to swoop. But now

Gannet's four engines were all roaring like artillery.

"Step her up, Bob," Wilmer was calling, "and get rid of this noise she's making."

It was necessary to taxi tail to wind, but, having gained a wide clear space, the young aviator gave the engines a short burst, applied the right amount of rudder, throttled down momentarily, and *Gannet* weathercocked into the wind.

Once more he opened the throttle and away she rose like an immense swan over the masts of anchored shipping.

"Now for the duel," Harwood called, as soon as the engines quieted down into a steady hum. "It's death for us—or him," he pointed to the enemy. "The cruiser has given him a refit and refilled his tanks. Look all round and act quickly."

Bob gripped tight hold of his controls, caught a glance of men gazing up from steel decks wondering what was to be the result.

Bang! CRASH!

“Phew! That was a bomb meant for us!”

The sea rose up in a pinnacle of water and swished back a dirty brown.

In vain Bob sought to get his craft clear of that shadow which indicated how successfully the amphibian was keeping station directly above. To right, to left, the flying-boat turned, but always the Black Handers regained the superior position.

It was clear as day that the red craft's engines had been given a quick but beneficial overhaul on board *Cockatrice*; it was not less apparent that *Gannet*, after all these hundreds of miles, needed the same attention—badly.

“Rise or smash up!”

Bob determined to risk everything. If the engines broke down through overwork——bad luck. But he must take the big risk. So, whacking them up to make more revolutions than had ever been called for, he drove her for all the flying-boat could leap.

“Good old *Gannet*!”

Wilmer could not restrain a wild cheer.

Up she shot into the warm clear sky. Up and up she rose at a perilously steep angle, and then there was no more shadow. Bob could see on his starboard side, but some distance ahead and distinctly below him, the red amphibian now illumined with the sun’s brilliant rays.

“For his tail—go for his tail!” Harwood was encouraging, in wild excitement. “Keep him in that position, and he’s yours. The Z-rays can be used only dead ahead”

Rattle-rattle-rat! Rat-tat! Rattle!

But the Black Handers could shoot! Already the bows of *Gannet* could bear witness to that. Still, it was lucky those punctures were so well above the water-line.

From the commanding height Wilmer and the Skipper were replying with such effect that the enemy was not happy. He, too, was

trying quick turns, but Bob's ready hands were counteracting every move.

The pace was terrific; it was a wonder that any motors could endure such a load. Bob flashed a look at his instruments.

"Two-sixty-five miles an hour! How much longer will those engines keep going?"

They were well out into the Atlantic now. The coast of Africa was vanishing into obscurity. By the appearance of several steamers Bob inferred that already the Cape Town-Teneriffe track had been passed, and they would soon be crossing the liners coming up from South American ports bound for the English Channel.

A speck showed up to the north. Two masts! One fat funnel, one thin funnel!

The amphibian sighted the ship simultaneously and turned sharply towards it.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Bob laughed, as he forthwith turned to head the amphibian off.

"The *Cockatrice*!" Wilmer was just indicating. "Black Handers want to reach her."

But the boy at the controls merely nodded. He was feeling a joyous confidence that as long as the engines maintained their revolutions, he was driving the red airplane further and further out to sea: further and further from the enemy's base.

The cruiser stoked up, black smoke rose from her funnels, she altered course due west to follow in the chase. Wireless calls were being exchanged. Too late!

In her most youthful days the old *Cockatrice* could do her thirty knots. Today, Harwood had assured the boys, with a scratch crew and needing dry-docking, she would be doing her utmost at twenty-two knots.

By the rapidity with which those masts and funnels now disappeared below the horizon, such a theory was substantiated.

Alone over the Atlantic! Two aircraft in deadly duel! The sharp irregular burst of

firing kept senses keen and vigilant. Thrilling? It was the Schneider Cup race, the Derby, the Gordon Bennett championship, and half a dozen other contests, in one.

"Couldn't you get a bit more speed out of her?" Harwood shouted at the top of his voice, but was heard just faintly in the terrific wind.

"Full out! Maximum revs!" Bob signalled.

"Then take the big risk."

"Do what? I can't hear you."

"He's - far - from - his - base. Sit - on - his-tail. T-a-i-l. *Tail!*"

Bob's raised hand showed that he understood. The great moment had come, the sun would soon begin to sink. Night would mean escape for the enemy, who even now was continually endeavouring to sheer off to the right.

Getting tired, was he?

Another fierce fusillade from the enemy's stern. Another brisk reply from Wilmer and Harwood. And then, looking neither to right nor left, unconscious of sea and air, thinking

only of that diabolical adversary who was bent on destroying the world's shipping, Bob waited till his fellow bird-men had poured in another volley.

Down! Down!

The curved, metal bows of the flying-boat smote the amphibian's tail, swept aside rudders, turned to port, missed, and were about to attack again, when at the speed of split-seconds everything seemed to happen at once.

Bits of planes went falling like dead leaves on to the ocean. The amphibian took a sudden nose dive, righted herself, began planing down; and then such a sight presented itself as Bob had never witnessed outside a cinema.

"Fuel-tanks! That last attack did it!" Wilmer was crying out. "Look—she's on fire. She's going to her doom at last."

But two men were seen doing wonders with a couple of fire-extinguishers, and now there was more slate-coloured smoke than yellow flame.

“Better glide down,” Harwood commanded. “We’ve beaten a clever foe, we’ve saved the ships in Río de Oro. It’s our next duty to save lives.”

Bob nodded. *Gannet* went zooming towards the speckless Atlantic. It was lucky that there was nothing more violent this evening than a gentle ocean swell.

Gannet’s helmsman was just about to flatten out where the smoking amphibian had alighted, when a most remarkable occurrence took place, that happened with such dramatic celerity as to leave him in amazement.

The boy was reckoning his distance. Wilmer and Harwood were getting ready the conical drogues, so as to bring up alongside the enemy before the latter could sink. Every moment was precious, men would have to be hauled out even against their will. Humanity, friendly or otherwise, must be saved after a fair fight. And there was Higgin going out with a boat-

hook to the tip of the starboard plane . . .
when, whizz!

“Well, I’m blown!”

Gannet was taxiing over the surface, Bob had throttled her right down, a few more seconds and she would stop. Not three hundred yards separated the two rivals.

Out of the northern sky there tore down something that at first resembled a fly, but rapidly expanded into a sea-gull, and then became instantly magnified into an aircraft.

“Seaplane! Silver painted! One of those new Navy scouts they’re building on the Th. . . .”

Harwood stopped. He called to mind Rawlyn’s last radiogram.

“They’ve beaten us!” Wilmer suddenly shouted as *Gannet’s* speed fell off.

Four pairs of eyes could scarcely conceive that such a quick action was possible. For, from beneath their gaze, the silver scout had alighted alongside the smoking wreck, arms

were grabbing three figures aboard, and the propellers of the new arrival had not stopped revolving more than a moment, when seaplane, Black Handers, and all, were again in the air. But Harwood acted quickly.

"After him—quick! That's the result of the amphibian's wireless calls. The *Cockatrice* was bringing the silver scout to Río de Oro. I see it all now."

But *Gannet* was slow in starting. Higgin was struggling manfully with the propellers, and not getting a kick out of anything.

"Hurry up! We'll lose a glorious chance. Night's coming on and"

"Something wrong here, sir!"

"Can't be, Higgin. Can't be. After the splendid way those engines have behaved"

"She won't start, sir. She won't take her fuel."

It was maddening to see that pin-head fade away in the remote distance.

"Looks like choked jets to me," the worried

mechanic decided at last. "She must have sucked in salt water through the air intakes."

"Intakes?"

"Yessir—just as we taxied along the surface. Bit of a splash, like. I remember once a similar case in the"

"Never mind. Get busy. Set to work. Four engines! Four men! We'll all lend a hand."

But it was next discovered that the sparking-plugs had become flooded and needed drying. And all this valuable time was being lost just when it could least be spared!

"Wind and sea getting up presently," Wilmer foresaw, though he prudently kept his prophecy to himself.

Bob was too bitterly disappointed to engage in conversation. His mind was working on the Black Handers' next move. But Harwood's voice brought him back to the present.

"Wilmer," he spoke hurriedly. "Get the following message wirelessly:"

"Aye, aye, Skip'."

"Ready? 'To all ships. Avoid northwest coast of Africa. Three vessels lying captured in Río de Oro covered by disguised Cardiff collier require immediate help. Pass to Gibraltar. Red amphibian sunk in Atlantic, but Black Handers rescued by *Cockatrice's* seaplane."

"Anything else? Shall we give our own position?"

"Not on your life. The *Cockatrice* would hunt us day and night."

"Likely as not the seaplane has wireless too. In that case, she's already given us away."

Bob's remark seemed to be based on probability: but it was not helpful.

"There's one thing," he added. "The silver scout isn't making for the cruiser, or for Río de Oro."

"How 'd'you know that?"

"Because I took a careful bearing of her from the compass, as long as ever she was in

sight. She's more like making for South America: her course was exactly sou'west-by-south."

"Sou'west-by-south?" Harwood repeated. "Come below. Let's examine the chart." Then a few minutes later, "According to our dead reckoning, we ought to be about here," he pencilled a small circle at a spot between the nearest approach of Africa's shoulder to South America's continent, and began moving a pair of parallel rulers.

"I've got it," Wilmer understood almost at once. "That course leads to a mysterious island. Let me tell you its name, let me tell you something else. . . ."

But just then Higgin called down into the saloon.

"Engines all ready, sir. Everything correct; but the glass tumbling back something cruel."

"Come on, boys," Harwood led them on deck. "We'll get under way. You both did

jolly well today, but we've got to do much better work unless Ah! Here's a find."

He was concentrating on something which Higgin had just pushed under his eyes.

"By jove! That's a most extraordinary thing," Bob agreed. "Wilmer, what d'you think of this development?"

Chapter IX

HIGGIN with a boathook had just picked up out of the Atlantic an oblong book all dripping wet, and the *Gannet* crew began turning over its pages eagerly.

“Excellent!” Harwood congratulated. “Couldn’t be better. If we’ve lost sight of the enemy’s seaplane, at least we know where he’s bound. Bob was perfectly right: she’s heading sou’west-by-south for that lonely island, Fernando de Noronha. I always believed that some day it would become prominent in aerial navigation.”

But Wilmer required further information.

“Look here, old chap,” the Skipper went on. “What we’ve just picked up is nothing less than the Black Handers’ confidential book of signals.”

“Whoop! Secret code?”

“And a list of all their pre-arranged rendezvous. See for yourself: Southwest Ireland, the

Azores, Río de Oro. And now Fernando”

“Just exactly what is this island you’re speaking of?”

Harwood spread an Atlantic chart in front of him.

“It’s owned by Brazil, a hundred and twenty-five miles nor’east of Cape St. Roque, where there was once a penal settlement.”

“Looks small enough on that chart.”

“So it is—about seven miles long and less than two miles wide. But look at its strategic position. My belief is that some day soon flying-boats will be running from Southampton to New York calling at the Canaries, the Cape Verde Islands, Fernando de Noronha, Barbados; and then in returning to Europe stopping to fuel only at the Azores.”

“I get you. The old sailing-ship routes. Fair wind all the way?”

“Precisely. Keep that under your hat. When you have your Anglo-American Aerial Transport Company running”

"Looks to me," decided Bob, after moving his pencil this way and that, "as if all the steamers between Europe and South America pass this way."

"That's the whole point. Fernando is plumb on the track: it's an ideal place for any air-raider to swoop out of the sky and hold up half the Atlantic trade."

"Sooner we arrive there, the better," both boys agreed. "The enemy will be doing millions of damage if we don't hurry."

Thus *Gannet* rose from the surface just as the great rolling ocean was beginning to look ugly with angry white crests tipping the waves. Then like some gigantic bee she went buzzing in the direction of the vanished enemy.

With sunset came an increase of wind, and the seas were lashed to fury.

"Wouldn't it be frightfully funny," Bob had remarked to Wilmer, "if the engines gave out and we had to alight?" Low clouds were bank-

ing up, and then came the rain before they had reached as far south as the equator.

It stung the pilot's face and hands, and before the aftermost cockpit hatch was screwed down, there was quite a considerable amount of water in the hull. *Gannet* became heavy and dull, until the semi-rotary pump was set to work and cleared her.

But that night was a series of anxieties. Twice the two inner engines took it in turns to run with alarming unevenness.

"Not doing more than fifteen hundred revs," complained the anxious Higgin. "Now she's all right again!"

But a few minutes later she was all wrong. There was nothing for it but to stop one engine at a time and investigate.

"All jolly fine," Bob was thinking. "But it's blowing a 40-mile wind and, if we're not mighty careful, someone's going to be lost overboard tonight."

Harwood had just given orders for the

defect to be found, and the two boys were assisting Higgin. The wind screeched between the two planes, howling at them in annoyance, and bringing the speed down considerably.

“Better lash yourselves pretty tight,” they had been commanded. “One slip, one lost foothold, would be fatal. Nothing could save you.”

So, with an electric torch secured above them, and each fellow with a line round his waist, they hung on perilously, uncoupling joints, working with spanners, whilst *Gannet* bucked and bumped atrociously.

Just before midnight, but not until then, both engines were at last in full commission once more. “Bits of dirt got into the float-chamber,” the weary Higgin explained to his skipper. “It’s more’n high time, sir, we found a nice little quiet spot to give ’em a proper overhaul. Rushing all over the Atlantic, like we’ve been doing, isn’t fair to any engine.”

But Harwood knew that time was more precious than ever.

"Got to go full out, Higgin, gale or no gale. If the enemy seaplane has a few hours to itself off Fernando, she can clean up a nice little score. All the trade between the United States, or Canada, or the West Indies to such ports as Bahia and Rio Janeiro will soon be at a standstill. Insurance rates will become prohibitive: there'll be commercial panics everywhere—both sides of the Atlantic."

So the mighty bird fought her way through fierce gusts and bumpy strata. The human strain became such that no pilot could endure the responsibility and active control for long: every forty-five minutes he was changed, and a fresh successor arrived to take over.

"Skipper sure is driving her," Wilmer had just remarked when a wireless order from London sparked through to report *Gannet's* position. Harwood had pencilled the approximate mark on the chart, and the boy was

about to transmit; when suddenly there was a peal of ear-piercing thunder, and forthwith came a terrifying display of lightning. It ran oscillating over the dark sky, making the night more like some horrible dream, zig-zagging with a wild impulse and giving to the illumined flying-boat an appearance of eerie reality. In the dry shelter of the saloon the two junior members of the crew waited and listened.

Through the closed scuttles they watched the tropical storm lashing the sea into a welter of infuriated water, whilst the flashes of electricity danced round it in eccentric caperings. And, all the while, rain hissed through the air like myriads of needles. Harwood refused to allow Rawlyn's signal to be answered just yet.

"Too dangerous with all this about. I'm going up to 3000 feet to get away from it."

And then he suddenly remembered. "Why! *Gannet* herself is all-metal. She's a perfect

conductor. That's the one drawback to levirium."

The thought had barely passed through his brain than he heard a shout from below and a strange scent assailed his nostrils. From the cockpit emerged smoke, and intermittently there was the flickering of flame. Anxious voices arose mingled with heavy fumes.

"What's happened?" he called out. "Below there—is the ship on fire?"

Higgin came running forward.

"She has been. Young gentlemen told me not to worry you. Must be this lightning wandering 'bout. Excuse me, sir, but I reckon we'd have lost *Gannet* if it hadn't been for these young aviators. Cool as cool they were."

"It's all out now; and they're already at work re-wiring and putting in new switches. Don't seem to be a thing they can't turn their hand to."

The Skipper said nothing, but it thrilled him with delight to know that at every emer-

gency his fine crew were ever on the top line. Then:

“Weather seems to be clearing up a bit, Higgin. I’ll drop down to 1000 feet. Get a message through to the Admiralty now, and then get some sleep, every one of you.”

It was like Harwood to think of his men before all else. He had brought *Gannet* through as bad a magnetic storm as ever attacked an aircraft. Although he kept reminding his companions that it must have been equally trying for the Black Handers, he knew well enough at the back of his mind that with luck the enemy seaplane might have just avoided such an exciting incident.

The hours ticked by, the sun rose, and after an early breakfast Bob was the first to sight, rising out of the ocean, fantastically-shaped rocks, whose pinnacles were shrouded in a wreath of dense vapour.

Wilmer was quietly surveying the desolate

scene, and Harwood was snatching a few minutes' shut-eye in the Skipper's cabin.

The recoil of rolling waves breaking against the cliffs and lashing themselves into soapy surf; the uncanny ravines dismally black, rugged and steep, with here and there a stream gushing forth like silver veins; the ledges of jagged reefs jutting well out into the sea; made up a picture that suggested nature in its terrifying mood.

Harwood came up to view the spectacle but seemed not more favourably impressed.

"What a rotten place! Just as inhospitable as it could be. Never mind. We'll make a circuit of the island, and find some bay on the lee side. There's a French cable station connecting with Dakar in Africa, and there's a British manager. He'll help us. Likely enough there's a long message waiting from Admiral Rawlyn."

But four aviators were doomed to disappointment that morning. They flew across

the high peaks, looked into every surf-washed crevice and tiny bay, but never a sign of the enemy's seaplane nor of anything remotely resembling a cable station.

"That's funny. Perhaps the mist is playing pranks," the Skipper seemed puzzled. "Let's begin all over again."

So they searched from the east, along the south shore, round to the northwest and north. For a few seconds engines were stopped, and *Gannet* flew low beneath the overhanging white canopy that resembled cotton-wool.

The crashing of the seas against black rocks, and the shrill, sad cries of startled gulls hovering about in thousands, made a curiously melancholy effect on them. Cragg rudely torn, as if by some volcanic eruption, tinged with strange hues, unutterably barren, with showers of spray thrown by the wind and descending on them all the time, suggested the extremity of desolation.

"Reckon the Frenchmen got tired and

packed up," Higgin delivered his opinion. "Cable station? Drive me mad in a week—same as anybody else."

But, as the flying-boat swerved round to the north-east, something caught the boys' vigilant eyes. They looked again, tried the binoculars, and then convinced themselves. Harwood agreed with their discovery.

"Quite right! I see buildings, too. Let's investigate closer. We'll plane down as close as we can. Some of the men will come running out. Stand by to make a semaphore. Ask if they've been visited by a seaplane."

Still, no human being appeared. *Gannet* was directly above the buildings before the next discovery was made. Was this a station of dead men? Was everyone stricken with mortal disease? Surely there must be at least one person at the look-out?

It was Wilmer who solved the problem.

"Not buildings," he demonstrated, "but

ruins of buildings. They've not been inhabited for years. Sure, Skip'; take another glance."

"By jove, you're right again. I don't understand it. Can it be that the seaplane has been and destroyed them already? One thing we don't know—was there a Z-ray apparatus in that aircraft as in the amphibian?"

The answer was not forthcoming. But the evidence of ruined houses seemed to denote a terribly devastating power of some sort.

The flight was completed to the south-east and south, leaving men and boys more bewildered than ever. Bob made a bright query, which received little favour, however.

"I suppose we can't have made a mistake? I mean—we can't have got to the wrong island?" But he was promptly argued out of that notion.

"This part of the Atlantic might be the West Indies, if you talk like that," Wilmer rejected. "Islands off Brazil don't grow like palm trees."

"Besides—without measuring it exactly—this island is obviously about half a dozen miles long: it's narrow enough, too."

And now Higgin must have his say.

"Excuse me, sir, there's a day's work at those engines overdue. That gale shook 'em up. If we can't do a bit of overhaul, she's going to lose half her revs, for the rest of the voyage. I was thinking . . . if there's a nice little cove at the back of the island"

Harwood considered. The seaplane had got away, she had apparently destroyed the station and departed to an unknown base. Any hour she might return and insist on a duel in the air. Perhaps even now she was re-fuelling less than 150 miles off in some secluded Brazilian bay. Where would *Gannet* be, if all four engines gave out at the critical moment? Better take a risk now and get the refit done with.

"Very well, Higgin. That's approved."

So it came to pass that on the western, or

lee, side where the island was sheltered from the south-east wind, four pairs of eyes began searching for a suitable temporary anchorage. The delay was certainly annoying, but it was inevitable.

Coasting along as slowly as two engines would allow them, violent squalls would keep darting down from some ravine and make air-manship no easier for the experienced but worried skipper. He was still unsatisfied with the trend of events. There were moments in these gusts when the big-planed *Gannet* tried to get out of control and almost succeeded. And then the wind, fluked by the glens, would blow in every direction.

Finally, there seemed only one little spot convenient, lying between a steep beach and a miniature islet. *Gannet* came down to the surface, taxied a few hundred yards, and let go anchor. A hot sun and an oily swell from that very moment began to make their sojourn full of discomfort.

Bob and Wilmer, shirt sleeves rolled up to elbows, were rapidly at work dissecting the motors under Higgin's active supervision. The flying-boat was no steady mansion as she kept snubbing to the horrible swell, and then swinging irresponsibly with every draught of stray squalls.

Bob was finding it, indeed, no easy matter to hold on with one hand and unscrew nuts with the other. With the concentrated attention of one who was showing himself an enthusiastic mechanic, he had given up thinking for his own safety. To get the job done well and quickly was his sole concern. "Let's get away from here soon as we can."

Not unnaturally, then, when an extra big swell and a more vicious flurry of wind combined to heel their craft to starboard, Bob went sliding in a non-stop run to that same direction. Only by the quick resource of Wilmer was he saved from most certain death.

"Look what you've missed," Higgin pointed

to where the boy had just been prevented from making a hole in the sea.

"Goodness! What an escape! Why, there's a great ugly shark waiting. I never gave it a thought."

At this moment up rushed Harwood on deck, chart in hand.

"Look here, you fellows. Nice lot of idiots we've been. It's all my fault. That spell of northerly wind took us further to the southward than I calculated. We never allowed enough for leeway. We've got to the wrong island, after all. This isn't Fernando de Noronha."

"Thank heaven for that," said Higgin. "I wouldn't live in this place for a pension."

Chapter X

"IF THIS isn't Fernando," Wilmer wished to be told, "then where are we? How d'you account for the ruined buildings?"

"They were once a Portuguese settlement—ages ago. This is the island of Trinidad."

"What? West Indies?"

"No—the other Trinidad. South-east of Bahia. I well remember now reading that neither the latitude nor longitude of Trinidad has ever been correctly determined. But that couldn't have taken us so far out of our course. As a navigator I'm ashamed."

Wilmer suggested that the gale was largely responsible: *Gannet's* drift to the southward must have been considerable.

"That's the greatest difficulty which confronts us pioneers of today. Flying the ocean, with no means of finding accurately the effect of a beam wind, is still something of a gamble.

Every aviator who has hopped the Atlantic found the same problem."

"Something else as well," Bob had already thought it out for himself. "The compass! All that electricity in the air—that big magnetic storm—it was bound to create a lot of deviation. Come to think of it—we're lucky to have hit Trinidad."

Harwood smiled in agreement, but quickly added:

"Poor Higgin doesn't think we're fortunate: now would any of us, if we were driven ashore. This is the place notorious for its man-eating land-crabs as big as dogs."

Both boys gave an involuntary shudder.

"This is where pirates in the olden days buried their ill-gotten treasure; where adventurers in modern times have lost their health, and nearly lost their ship, in trying to discover that treasure. Trinidad is full of loathsome birds, dead trees, desolate rats, and saffron-coloured crabs with dreadful goggle

eyes. They stand on their legs and wave their pincers at you threateningly. If you happened to fall and be stunned, they'd devour you to death. I'd sooner be drowned."

"Gee whiz," Wilmer ejaculated. "Wish we'd never come."

All hands in their eagerness to depart were toiling with joints, replacing sparking-plugs, screwing down inspection-plates, renewing aileron control-wires, tightening up rigging, and making a slight rudder adjustment. There was little left to be done by the afternoon, when without the slightest warning the wind veered right round and began blowing gently towards the shore. Harwood was the first to notice the change, but in a very few minutes *Gannet's* lively capers told everyone that they were now being endangered.

"Time we cleared out," he gave the word. "If that anchor-rope snaps, we're for the beach, my lads. And if once our craft hits, then the length of her life is about five minutes.

No ship is ever likely to call at Trinidad these days, and there would be nothing to eat. We should be easy victims for the land-crabs."

Higgin pleaded that in a few moments the entire job would be finished and the feed-pipes connected up. But, just at the last, there was a hitch: a nut had been misplaced, possibly gone overboard, and he was looking amongst his spares for another.

Whallop! Crack!

Harwood and the boys guessed, but scarcely dared to express their fears.

Crack!

"It's the cable rope. Two of its strands have gone. If another big roller comes jerking her. . . . What about hauling in a couple of fathoms? It's being chafed to bits."

Easier said than done. With the combined weight of three people in the bows, she ducked her head into the steep waves and ran grave risk of being sunk.

"Batten down. Close all cockpit hatches,"

came the order not a moment too soon. One more wave would have filled her up.

Higgin had just come on deck again and was perspiring with energy in that tropical heat, when a new excitement developed.

"We're dragging," announced Wilmer. "Anchor's coming home."

It was a cheerful predicament. To heave in on that weakened rope meant that the anchor would hold less than before; to slack out was to cause a fatal strain, invite a final breaking of the strands and—most serious of all—leave the anchor on the bottom of the Atlantic.

"Start up engines—come on," the Skipper ordered testily. He was resolved not to lose everything in one sudden cleavage.

"Just a second, sir." Higgin was tinkering away with heroic patience, but some finicking adjustment defied him on every occasion.

"It's too late now," Harwood shouted quickly and anxiously. "You must get way

on her: give us power. Anchor's off the ground, we're hauling in."

"And *Gannet* is drifting beam on to the shore. Phew!" Bob could say nothing further. His quick gaze took in the proximity of rocks and soapy surf, he made a rapid calculation of how many sharp pinnacles were showing themselves in the turbulent back-wash, and tried to convince himself that there was a wide enough channel to float between.

But perception overcame mere optimism; it was obvious enough that the quickly-rising wind was bent on destruction. The hollow roar of smashing seas scooping out arched caves was alarming and almost unnerving.

Bob turned his back on the scene and tried to avoid listening. He rushed to assist Higgin: the crisis had certainly come,—*Gannet* was never so close to being wrecked.

It was the first time the boys had ever seen Harwood so impatiently annoyed, so insistent on the carrying out of orders. But the crisis

was imminent, their whole future was now hanging on a mere thread of chance.

Would the engines respond to the self-starter? Would they do this moment what they had never failed to perform?

They refused. Higgin was desperate, Harwood was fuming, both boys were apprehensive, yet resolved to fight till the last. The cruel shore had grown remarkably big during the last few minutes, and the wailing of gannets, the flight of cormorants, with the howling of wind and pounding of seas, combined to instil awe into hearts that had often withstood fear. And now the Skipper was bending a new rope in the vain possibility that in this last extremity their beloved *Gannet* would be saved after all.

He was taking no chances, however. Even whilst he knotted the new rope with the old he was preparing for the inevitable.

"Till the last minute, all of you, stick to the ship. Don't attempt anything rash; but as

she strikes the beach wait for a smooth in the waves—there's usually one brief calm after every third breaker—and then jump for it."

So it had got as bad as that? But the boys were worrying about Harwood. They well knew that he would be the last to leave: he would never think of moving till all three were in safety. But would the hull last that length of time?

And then, when the wind freshened violently and there remained not an inch more than a dozen yards between stern and shore, something smote their ears with such suddenness that the sound appeared a novelty.

"Hurrah! Cheers! Well done, Higgin."

Two of the motors were working, the third followed, and Harwood leapt straight into the cockpit. "Look out for yourselves," he warned. "Hang on. I'm going to risk being washed down, but mind the waves don't finish you chaps."

They needed no second telling. The fourth propeller had just begun to revolve, when the massive boat plunged headlong straight into wind and wave. The first few seconds were full of tension. Would she do it? Would she smash her way through? Or be herself smashed?

"Skipper's attempting the only possible thing," Wilmer agreed. "It's do or die here."

Then followed a solid mass of water, as everything became dark and green. It came and went, left them breathless and soaked to the skin. Harwood looked round, breathed a sigh of relief when he saw three pairs of hands hanging on like limpets, motioned them to open up hatches and go below, as *Gannet* took a great jump into the air clear of the wild sea.

"We've done it. But it was too narrow a margin for my liking. Change into dry clothes, and get a square meal inside you. We're going fine. Engines are quite forty per cent better."

By the tell-tale compass in a corner of the

saloon, Wilmer soon realised that *Gannet* was on a northerly course. "That means Fernando after all. I'd like to know what's happened to the Professor and his mates this while."

But Bob was thinking rather of the immediate past. He was so full of joy at their almost incredible escape that he had the same feeling a fellow senses on the last morning of school-term. And on those bright occasions something always moved him to express his emotions in home-made verse. He had just hung up a damp shirt to dry at Higgin's galley, and was humming to himself:

"Oh, follow the river and sail to the sea:

That is the life if you want to be free.

But soar up the air and fly to the sky

Then you'll be contented—what's more you'll be dry."

There were loud guffaws from Wilmer as he stood tightening up his belt.

"Bob," he interrupted, "that was a jolly good idea Skipper gave us for running the Atlantic passenger-mail route. If we ever

clean up the Black Hand gang, there's big money in this flying-boat proposition."

"We'll make a fortune taking people more quickly across to the West Indies than today they need travelling from London to the Riviera. But there's one thing"

"Don't worry about capital. If my father gets our scheme good, we get his money. He'll see us through to the end."

"That's not what I was thinking. Say, Wilmer, if some day we had an amphibian, and there was anything like a sporting chance, I'd like to have another look at Trinidad."

"To be devoured by crabs?"

"I believe we could land on that bit of ground to the north-east. You know—near the Portuguese ruined buildings."

"And grow silk-worms?" (Wilmer was in one of his cynical moods just now.)

"Idiot! Something much more exciting. We'd blow up the crabs with small hand-bombs, and then we'd set to work excavating."

“Excavating what?”

“Buried treasure! Pirates’ gold and silver! An aircraft is the only proper way to go about the job: but she must be able to take the ground.”

Wilmer was more than impressed. And the more he reflected on this possibility, the more he relished the idea. He pictured to himself flying off from Trinidad with boxes of long-forgotten treasure safely concealed in an amphibian’s hull. That was the solution of a big difficulty.

“All these other expeditions have failed because they had to rely on ships, and landing from boats in a dangerous surf. As soon as it began to blow, the ship had to leave.”

“And another thing—with an aircraft we save all climbing. We could investigate valleys and explore ravines. So, after all, this may not be the last time we visit Trinidad.”

“None the less,” added Wilmer, “we’re not coming without heaps of food, plenty of

fuel, and a jolly good map to help locate the pirates' secret spot."

Now the following morning, during Wilmer's watch, *Gannet* found herself above the steady line of traffic running between the River Plate and Europe. Grain-ships, Cardiff colliers, steamers with frozen meat, liners full of passengers, an ocean-going Dutch tug, one or two tramps, a German sailing ship going home with nitrate: the steady traffic seemed to denote a maritime street.

And then shortly afterwards came Fernando de Noronha.

Harwood and the two boys were ferried ashore as soon as *Gannet* was safely anchored and they made their way quickly to the cable station. But it was difficult to convince anyone.

"Certainly there arrived a long telegram from London via Dakar, but it was delivered yesterday."

"To whom?" Harwood demanded with considerable indignation.

“To the person addressed: Captain Harwood aboard the flying-boat *Gannet*. He flew off fifteen minutes later.”

Bob and Wilmer looked at each other.

“You mean that seriously? What did he look like? Describe him.”

“Well—sallow-faced, tall thin man, conspicuous moustache”

“That’s Kenthal for certain.”

“One of his companions called him Professor . . . there were five of them. Seemed very delighted and amused to receive the message. Thanked me several times.”

“And the telegram was in code?” Bob asked.

“It was in plain English, sent by ‘nine-nought-nine.’ But why should this interest you?”

The Skipper looked from Bob to Wilmer, and then at the spokesman.

“Interest me? *I* am Harwood, and that is the *Gannet*. If you doubt me, come aboard

and I'll convince you with letters, instructions." The Skipper felt in his sleeve. "Here's my handkerchief: there's my name on it." He removed his cigarette case from an inside pocket.

"Look inside. That was presented to me ten years ago. There's my name engraved. Do you disbelieve me? Am I impersonating—or was the Professor?"

The worried stranger scratched the side of his head.

"There's been a serious mistake. But what could I do? How should I know the difference between a seaplane and a flying-boat?"

"But it's terrible to think the enemy has received information that was never meant for him. You have a copy? I'd like to read it."

Five minutes later Harwood's eyes nearly leapt from his head.

"Kenthal was allowed to learn all that? Dear me! This is pathetic. No wonder he was pleased." Then turning to the boys, "Just listen to this from Admiral Rawlyn."

Chapter XI

HARWOOD read aloud the message cabled from London.

"Give up the impossible chase. Black Handers too clever for us. Return home when you can."

Wilmer was immediately for disobeying orders. "Of course we shan't give up. No fear."

"I don't at all see," Bob confirmed, "that Kenthal has beaten us. On the contrary we've disorganised his plans, and smashed up one of his aircraft."

The Skipper was in difficulties. Admiral Rawlyn must know best, but this instruction was irritating. Could someone in his office have blundered?

"I'll cable now," Harwood finally decided, "and request permission for these orders to be cancelled. What say you, boys?"

"And you might remind him we still have

our own code-book. That should prevent his messages falling into wrong hands."

An hour later, whilst the young aviators were lying on the grass admiring the dense green vegetation covering the hillsides, their Skipper came running up with a reply just flashed from London:

"Alleged message a fake. All my signals in code. You have made Atlantic too hot for Kenthal and upset his organisation. Believe he is retreating to secret base up river Amazon to prepare for raids on Panama Canal traffic bound across Pacific. Stop him."

Word by word, as they reclined on mother earth, the two lads had decoded the cipher telegram whilst Harwood wrote it down. Then, thrusting back the thin secret code-book into the depths of his coat pocket, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Kenthal must have accomplices in London; or they must have done it on their own initi-

ative. But how should they know we were bound for Fernando?"

Bob was ingenious at devising intentions and actions.

"That's easy," he tried to prove. "Kenthal would wireless *Cockatrice* that the amphibian was lost, and that the seaplane was proceeding to rendezvous pursued by *Gannet*. That seems reasonable?"

"Yes," Wilmer supported, "and the cruiser would naturally transmit that fact to their secret establishment in London; who, in turn, would try to help their friends by forbidding us to hunt the seaplane further."

The Skipper pondered a while. He was inclined to agree. The enemy had been just too clever. Nor did the latter know that the amphibian's signal-code was now in Harwood's cabin. So, having replenished fresh-water tanks, taken aboard fruit as well as a few loaves of fresh bread, and half a dozen plucked

chickens all ready for Higgin's galley, the *Gannet* once more rose from the Atlantic.

No little excitement filled the saloon as charts came tumbling out and reference books were consulted.

"All this rapid travel," Bob pretended to bewail, "puts quite a strain on a fellow's geography. If ever I'd guessed the knowledge would come in so useful, I'd never have been punished at school for inattention. . . . Amazon. . . Amazon . . . where are we? . . . 'Largest river in the world' . . . 'navigable to within 250 miles of the Pacific coast.'"

"Don't tell me those Black Handers are fools. Look here, Bob," they examined the South American map. "It's a jolly smart idea. They've got over two thousand miles of waterway right across South America, with any amount of creeks and tributaries."

"Excellent places for hiding a seaplane."

"Every facility for receiving stores. And by this time Kenthal will have his secret radio

stations well placed to supply information. But here's the point—he can reach into Colombia or Peru merely by taxying along the river.”

“Or hop across to the coast, hold up the Panama traffic. . . .”

“I’ve got it. There’ll be an auxiliary ship cruising about, fitted with wireless, and ready to hurry gold stolen from liners into a pre-arranged Pacific harbour.”

By the aid of a little imagination, and much piecing together of motives, probabilities and definite facts, the two lads were able to present Harwood with a clear-cut plan of the enemy’s aspirations.

“Quite a likely scheme,” he concurred. “If it’s true that we’ve been keeping Kenthal on the move, and he’s too busy fleeing to operate against merchantmen, then it’s quite reasonable to assume his transference to the South Seas. Besides—he knows that’s taking us still further from our own headquarters.”

Examination of the sea-stained oblong book clearly indicated the code word for 'Tacamatra.' Now 'Tacamatra' was presently found to be an Indian village situated on a tributary flowing into the upper Amazon. Only a casual glance at its position was needful to convince the trio that this was likely to reveal something interesting.

So away the *Gannet* buzzed up the Brazilian coast in the glorious sunshine with a deep blue sky overhead. The long stretches of golden sands, fringed with waving cocoa-nut trees, were whitened by a perpetual surf; whilst in the distant background were lovely ranges of forest-clad mountains.

"Wouldn't have missed all that scenery for the world," the boys agreed as they rested elbows on deck and leaned out of the foremost cockpit. There was something exhilarating to mind and body, as they followed that tropical coast for hundreds of miles and breathed in such pure, clear air.

The south-east trade wind assisted them on their north-westerly course, adding miles to their speed. With *Gannet's* scuttles wide open, the whole boat was kept beautifully ventilated and cool, and there were vanilla ices, as well as delicious lemon-squashes in tall glasses to relieve all thirst.

"Yes, it's a great life. It sure is," enthused Wilmer. "The way *Gannet* looks after us and carries us across the world's map, hardly seems possible. Some of your seafaring clipper-ship ancestors—those old gentlemen with goatee-beards—would be crazy with jealousy if they could behold you and me."

Oceans, continents, spaces of sea or sky, seemed to lose all sense of vastness in *Gannet*. She went humming along in her marvellous manner over harbours, past bays and capes.

"Just like a seat in the movies," Bob couldn't help thinking.

And then the colour of the Atlantic began to change from its normal dark blue to a kind

of yellowish brown. The line of demarcation was as pronounced as if it had been painted by hand. Harwood explained the curious phenomenon immediately.

"I was expecting it about now," he smiled. "That's the mud brought down by the Amazon: sometimes you find this discolouration as far as two hundred miles out in the Atlantic."

And next came into view, with map-like appearance, the whole immense Amazon delta. Over the fine buildings of Para's city, whose red roofs gleamed in the brilliant sunshine, the blue gold-lined sea-bird turned inland. Shipping of all sorts could be seen huddled together, but the sight of this immense aircraft roused such surprise and admiration that half a dozen steamers began bleating a welcome from shrill sirens.

Quickly their example was followed by the rest, till finally bedlam seemed to have been let loose. Wilmer happened to be at the con-

trols, and in response to Harwood's order, the *Gannet* made a curtsey by way of acknowledgment at this warm greeting. Then, having turned a complete circle over the President's Palace, she carried on.

"Jolly decent of them," Bob expressed. "Brotherhood of the sea and air, I suppose."

But Harwood was not altogether pleased.

"Come to think of it—we should have acted more wisely if we'd been several thousand feet higher. Kenthal is bound to have his agents in Para on the look-out. By this time they'll be sending him a warning." He riveted his glance on the map. "Tacamatra—that's where we're bound. But we shan't reach it today."

Fifteen minutes later the full beauty of the tropical Amazon began to unroll itself. Wonderful equatorial trees and plants were revealed, and now it was possible to fly so low up the river that the boys could discern birds of all descriptions, colourings and plumage.

"That's a parrot," Bob suddenly spotted in surprise. "Another—five of them."

Then, lying still, lolling in the sun on a muddy bank, Wilmer pointed to a dark long creature with a short broad head.

"Alligator! Nice looking gentleman—I *don't* think."

Egrets and crested cranes, darting monkeys, native mud-huts, primitive dug-outs engaged in fishing; swamps, thatched roofs, an occasional steamer bound out across the ocean, would come into vision. There was one long entertaining panorama to keep attention fully occupied. Three times had the faithful Higgin to remind them that their meal was waiting on the saloon table.

Only a sudden feeling of emptiness and the thought of cold roast chicken with a fresh green salad from Fernando finally lured the boys below. But every few moments one of them would leap to an open scuttle and watch astonished natives, devoid of costume, come

rushing out of huts waving hands, dancing wildly on the bank, as *Gannet* swept low along the middle of the river.

Even the white managers of india-rubber plantations would issue forth from bungalow-verandahs and give the blue bird a rousing cheer.

“More like a royal progress,” Harwood remarked. “I begin to think *Gannet* really is rather wonderful. I never quite appreciated her size till we landed at Fernando.”

That evening it was decided to halt before seven o'clock. Harwood understood that whilst engines could be driven with insistence, human beings who had already passed through so many exciting hours must at last catch up on sleep.

He chose a secluded backwater just off the Amazon's three-knot current, away from any sign of town or village. Then, planing down to the smooth still water, *Gannet's* way was checked with the usual routine of the ship,

the anchor splashed overboard, and she rode gently, head towards the slight stream.

Within five minutes both boys were diving into the warm waters and gambolling with rare relish. In spite of being cooped up these days, they were conscious of being fit as trained athletes. They were engaged in a great adventure, they were—in this aerial voyage of unlimited length—doing something that no flying-boat had hitherto attempted, and they knew it.

Again and again they climbed aboard over a float, up by the bows, across the stern, mounting even to the upper plane and thence practising some sensational high-dive. Once they swam across to the shore and lay basking in the setting sun. It was so good to be alive; it was glorious to have health and the sense of enjoyment.

But Harwood was taking no chances. Safe as the environment appeared this night, he

decided that each of them should in turns keep a two-hour watch.

"One never knows," he was fond of saying: "the most unexpected is often the inevitable. If Kenthal learns where we are, he'll do his best to make the place impossible."

It was the mosquitoes, however, which performed that unpleasant service. Mosquitoes and flying beetles throughout that night tormented with such relentless persistency that life became almost unbearable. To close the scuttles meant suffocation within a few miles of the equator: to keep them open was to invite hordes of ping-pinging pests, which bit and raised poisoned lumps on the skins of four tired travellers.

"Time we got out of this," Harwood roused them in the morning. "Nine hundred miles from the mouth we shall reach Manaos. Quite a port," he was saying through the open door of his cabin whilst in the act of dressing. "At Manaos we shall fill up with oil-fuel, but we

shan't stop long enough to get mosquito-nets. Sorry! Life's a hurry these days."

"Pleasanter in the air," Bob affirmed. "Heavens! Wasn't it hot last night?"

"You don't notice what a grand thing flying is, till you come back to earth and water. But the next generation will realise it. Before you two fellows reach middle age, aircraft will be as common as motor-bicycles and Ford cars. Yachtsmen will own seaplanes and flying-boats. People accustomed to spending summer vacations by the seaside will go for a trip to another continent. If they don't like one country, they'll go on to the next. Personally, in all my years at sea, I never felt so fit as I've done aboard *Gannet*.

So, when the tide had risen high enough to lift her off the unnoticed sand-bank in that backwater, the craft was careering this time along the surface swishing the water away from her slender body with her fine bows.

It was at Manaos, whilst they were lying

astern of an oil-lighter and had just fixed up the hose-pipe to the main tank, that a motor-boat came running from the shore.

"Cap'n Harwood?" hailed a clean-shaven, serious-faced man of athletic build. His age was perhaps thirty-eight, and his countenance honest. "Is Cap'n Harwood on board?"

"Harwood speaking," the Skipper came up from below. "Yes?"

"I have some confidential news to give you. May I come aboard?"

It was not till the visitor had been carefully scrutinised that permission was given. This was no time for taking risks.

"My name's Cortray," came the explanation. "I'm representative of the Green Funnel Line. Doubtless you've heard that we lost two of our steamers in the Atlantic? Only recently, thanks to co-operation between the British Admiralty in London and the office in New York, we've learned about Kenthal and his Z-rays. I take it we're talking in confidence?"

All three laughed.

"I belong to that line myself. Wilmer, here, is the son of the President, Mr. Lorning, and"

"Pardon me. But one has to be cautious these days. Yesterday we made a terrible mistake. A seaplane with five men arrived at Manaos and requested five hundred gallons of fuel."

"Don't tell me it was Kenthal!"

"I was away from the office at the time, and my sub-manager on the telephone gave orders for them to have as much as required—at the trade price of course."

Harwood thumped the saloon table with annoyance.

"The Green Funnel Line assisted its own enemy? Mr. Cortray, this is a serious error of judgment."

"It's so blameworthy that the sub-manager will probably lose his job. It's only fair to say this: I had told the staff nothing about Ken-

thal's methods. But listen—the seaplane was in a mighty anxiety to get away: her people gave it out that they were flying to Australia for a wager. Result? My men did the best for them.”

The Skipper regarded Mr. Cortray without enthusiasm.

“Is this all the news you bring aboard? You’re hardly much assistance, are you?”

“Just now,” the representative spoke quickly, “a steamer came down the river from below Iquitos. From what her commanding officer saw through his glasses, you’d better be on the alert if you approach Tacamatra.”

Both boys pricked up their ears.

“Kenthal has made himself a kind of fort. The creek has a boom across the entrance. He’s mounted a couple of quickfirers, and he’s bribed the Tacamar tribe of Indians to fight for him. At least the steamer’s skipper had a chat with a native who came alongside

in a dug-out, and seemed to imply that the white men were paying for spears and poisoned arrows."

"But what about the seaplane?"

"That's inside the boom which, by the way, is composed of those logs you'll have seen floating all down the Amazon."

"Thank you, Mr. Cortray. I'm much obliged to you. Kenthal seems to have dug himself well in. If you're cabling New York, report us to Mr. Lorning all well."

Then, the moment the man had gone, "Boys," announced the Skipper, "we're up against something pretty tough. Admiral Rawlyn expects us to see this job through, but only we can appreciate what that exactly means."

"Looks like a jolly interesting scrap," suggested Bob.

"I'm all for it," Wilmer as usual was urgent for the job at hand. "Now, Skip', what's our next move?"

Chapter XII

AS THE result of their united considerations it was decided that direct overhead attack on the Black Handers' base would be of doubtful value. Notwithstanding *Gannet's* great speed, it was well possible that the Z-rays might focus themselves successfully. Surprise under cover of night, and on foot, seemed more likely to promise luck.

"It's mighty cunning of these fellows," Bob appreciated. "Tacamatra is excellently placed for operating over either ocean, or in the Caribbean Sea. But for us, Kenthal could keep up this game as long as he liked."

To Wilmer's mind the enemy's plan was most feasible. Tacamatra was going to be the headquarters of the gang. By wireless Kenthal could direct his other aircraft or auxiliary ships, all over the seas. "And fly out himself as convenient, or return to his security. A

mind like that should be at work controlling some big business. He's a genius."

There was during the next few hours a subdued excitement aboard *Gannet*, from the time she cast off from the lighter and proceeded at moderate speed on two engines at a height of fifteen hundred feet. The first duty would be to locate Tacamatra, make a reconnaissance before sunset, and act in accordance with night plans.

So the flying-boat continued on a general westerly course in the air, thus avoiding the dangerous logs which came sweeping down with the strong tide. The luxuriant tropical trees and foliage, the red clay soil, an occasional floating island, some multi-coloured bird with a long tail, kept everyone's attention watching the banks whenever *Gannet* came low to identify map with twisting turns of the river.

At last they espied a small tributary on the north side, and, about a hundred yards up, a

double line of heavy logs lashed together stretched from bank to bank. Then came a quarter mile of water, in the middle of which rode unmistakably Kenthal's seaplane. But up stream of this position stretched another double line of logs.

"Sort of palisaded himself in," was Higgin's comment. "Just nice room for him to taxi off into the air."

The boys were taking mental photographs and obtaining a detailed impression, when Harwood planed down to investigate a small white patch.

"Ho! A tent. The Black Handers are living ashore."

Wilmer passed the binoculars to Bob.

"And they've constructed a mud rampart twenty paces off. . . . I can see a trench, then branches of trees . . . all sorts of awkward traps."

"If we've got to storm that camp . . . Gee! Three quickfirers mounted behind the ram-

part. . . . Indians, too! Crouched on either side of the trench! See the spears gleam? Regular ambush—that's what it is."

And before *Gannet* could turn away, several white men from the tent rushed out to the quickfirers, took aim, and opened up a hot fusillade.

"Must have a range-finder," exclaimed Harwood, not without admiration at the accuracy of the enemy: for already an ugly mark had shown itself along the foredeck, and a tiny piece of metal had been chipped from the starboard lower plane. "Better get out of this. The Z-rays will begin now."

He was only just in time. With a wild roar and steep climb, all four engines were opened out to allow the huge *Gannet* to disappear into the sky. She was a target no longer. But next came a reconsideration of suitable tactics.

"We've alarmed the enemy; we've let them understand we're here, and more than ever they'll be on the alert."

"A night attack is still the best," Bob was certain.

"The question," propounded Wilmer, "is how. To me a land expedition by dark, feeling our way over swamps, stumbling into ambushes and then trying to rush the camp, sounds impracticable. If the Skipper orders us, there's no more to be said. But"

Bob had another of his bright ideas.

"The Admiral expects us to clean up this fortified base immediately. We're four men against five, to say nothing of Indians and poison. There's only one method possible that I can see.

"Well? Let's have it."

"To burn them out."

Harwood was interested. "Burn them? But how?"

"This is my idea," Bob went on with confidence. "Wait till the night is well advanced and the Indian sentries have become drowsy. Then we'll alight on the tributary a mile

or two upstream. There's no moon tonight, and by using the two drogues we can drop down the river slowly with the tide and not need to use engines."

"I get that much. You mean that we can approach the upper boom without being detected, and then spring a surprise?"

"Very nearly," Bob waved aside the interruption. "As soon as we reach a certain distance above the log-boom, we can afford to empty those extra drums of oil-fuel we took from the Manaos lighter. Pretty inflammable stuff, I understand."

Wilmer saw the big notion, and nothing could now restrain his impetuosity.

"Bob means to cover the water with gallons of gasoline—set it alight—let it drift down under the logs—reach the seaplane"

"That's the whole thing in a nutshell," said Bob.

The Skipper considered the scheme from

every angle. Then, having weighed every possibility, he gave his decision.

“An extremely good suggestion. To prevent any bungling, we’ll rehearse it in our minds now. We’ll measure out exact distances on the map, choose the river’s bend as a landmark, reckon up the requisite number of minutes, and work to a schedule.”

So the afternoon sped on as every detail was set down on a half sheet of paper. The plan must work with perfect precision, or it would fail ignominiously and set themselves on fire instead. And there was another item: as soon as the river became a stream of moving fire, *Gannet* must be hovering about up in the air, at the right height, ready to encounter the seaplane escaping from immolation.

The sun sank, a glorious molten red; the cries of birds and strange animals moving in virgin forest died away. A vast velvety stillness pervaded the South American continent; at last midnight had passed, and the hour-

hands had reached three o'clock. Harwood had been at the controls allowing *Gannet* to cruise at economical speed, but now, glancing at the illumined dashboard, he saw that it was time for Higgin to call the boys and begin.

At the moment they gained the foremost cockpit, and Higgin began testing the trigger of his gun aft, *Gannet* was just about to plane down.

"Stand by the oil-drums," came the order half a minute later. "Leggo!"

They waited till the whole surface was streaked, and then added a second dose. From the rate of the stream it was calculated that in sixteen minutes the dangerous fuel should reach the upper booms whose lashings would immediately be consumed.

Glancing at the cockpit clock, Harwood was allowing *Gannet* to drop slowly down tide. Now and again the boys would alternately heave in or slack out the drogues, so as to keep

the craft in mid-stream, but not a voice was heard, not a sound was suffered.

Eleven minutes gone . . . thirteen . . . fifteen!

“Haul in drogues.”

Gannet rose into the air so quickly that Bob nearly fell out of the cockpit. Then, as she circled to the left and crossed the river just above the first line of logs, Harwood with excellent aim dropped overboard a flare. Before it reached its destination there followed two more from the bows and one hurled by Higgin.

The effect was remarkable. Flames shot up and danced like demons, causing explosions and turning the stream into an inferno of fire. Howls from the Indian watchmen rose upward, and the boys never forgot the sight of dark figures prancing about silhouetted against the flames, with high lights of ebony shoulders and pointed spears.

And now there was a small yellow light within the tent, then shadows moving hastily.

"They can't see us," remarked Wilmer, "but we can watch them."

It was an amazing spectacle to witness that furnace, and the heat became such that Harwood found it necessary to swerve *Gannet* to one side.

"You're all of you ready?" he reminded his three men. "You see Kenthal's crew are making a dash for it? They're out of the tent now, someone's launching an Indian dugout, they're pushing off to the seaplane"

"They'll never get there Look! The fire's burnt up their anchor-rope. She's adrift," Bob exclaimed. It was a thrilling moment to watch events from that height. No front seat at a tournament or a pyrotechnic display could have provided more exciting entertainment. Panic had seized the camp, the Black Handers were doing their best to catch up with the seaplane, the Indians could be seen racing off beyond rampart and trench into darkest oblivion. But what next?

"I hate having to spoil anyone's rest," Harwood was muttering half in earnest, with an invisible twinkle in his eye. "It's a shame to disturb Kenthal when he'd turned in so comfortably. But he shouldn't set Green Funnel liners and other fine ships on fire. Let's hope this'll teach him a"

Wilmer gave a whoop. "They've done it, Skip': they've got aboard . . . yes . . . she's taxiing now . . . she's about to take off. Watch out."

For a moment it seemed doubtful what would happen: but at least the flaming river would envelope the seaplane and destroy it like paper.

"She's unhurt," Harwood was observing. "Must be all-metal. Why, of course. She was the craft the Black Handers mysteriously stole from the Thames. Mind yourselves."

For at that instant the enemy leapt from blazing water, over the now loosened boom, and into the dark sky. It had been quick

work, bullets began whizzing from her direction, and the sharp crackle indicated how eagerly Kenthal's men were trying to cut off all pursuit.

Gannet was after them like an eagle, swooping and straightening out, climbing and then planing, in one tense contest of wills.

"Give it them," Harwood ordered. And three light guns spluttered in reply.

But, from the time that the chase had drawn the two flying craft away from the glare that stretched from one bank to the other, any further fighting had become impossible. As Wilmer neatly phrased the situation, "It's like looking for a nigger in a cellar."

For quite half an hour *Gannet* tore west, south, and finally circled back through north to Tacamatra. The sky was clear but black as pitch.

"Eluded us! They were lucky to have such a dark night, but it's useless to waste further

effort till daylight. We'll go back to Tacamatra."

Harwood was just as disappointed as the boys, but there was the one solace that for a fourth time they had kept the enemy on the run.

"If instinct and common sense have any value," Wilmer interposed, "the seaplane won't stop till she's reached the Pacific."

"It'll pay her best to reach the nearest sea where there's most traffic," was Bob's considered opinion. "And that suggests either side of the Panama peninsula."

Harwood made a rapid mental calculation.

"I was able to identify that Thames craft. She's one of the new 'Isis' type; they're good for a speed of a hundred and fifty miles. That means she should be off the Panama vicinity by noon. We can afford to make a little investigation before we go in pursuit."

So, by the time *Gannet* was over Tacamatra, with the loom of the village in the distance,

and a vague blurred line revealing the mud rampart, Harwood was planing low.

"The burning oil has nearly spent itself," Wilmer demonstrated. "Tide has carried the rest down the river. Hallo! Why the tent still stands! The light inside is still burning. What d'you make of that, Skip'? The flames were up to the canvas half an hour ago."

Harwood found it hard to explain. But when *Gannet* had once more anchored, and the boys swam ashore through the leaden waters, they found charred tree-trunks, the remains of the dug-out boat now like extinguished fire-brands, yet the tent canvas only blackened without being consumed.

Bob was the first to elucidate the secret.

"It's not canvas, but some specially thin material that's light as silk," he felt the texture. "Of course just the thing for carrying in an aircraft."

"But why wasn't it destroyed like everything else?" Wilmer argued.

For answer Bob picked up the lamp which Kenthal had in his hurry left behind. Then, extracting the naked candle, Bob applied its flame to the side of the tent slowly and deliberately from end to end.

"See? The material won't burn. It's specially treated—it's a kind of asbestos. Don't you get Kenthal's cleverness? And look—here's his sleeping-bag. That won't even scorch either. . . . Try this airman's helmet one of them had to leave. . . . Asbestos, too."

Wilmer understood perfectly.

"The Black Handers were determined not to suffer from their own Z-rays. Everything seems to be fire-resisting. We'll roll up the tent, get Higgin to throw us a line, and haul it on board. This is great. We can defeat Kenthal by his own means: we can make overalls out of this material and laugh at his rays."

Bob agreed, but was busily looking into a portfolio of the same material that was lying at the far end of the tent.

"As I live," he extracted a square map. "The very thing! Now we have the whole of his plans. This shows we weren't far wrong. By this time tomorrow the Black Handers should be our prisoners. Buck up! Skipper will be delighted."

Chapter XIII

HARWOOD was more than pleased. In a little corner of the bank, where an accumulation of oil was still burning, the silky asbestos was given a further convincing test.

"In future," he asserted, "before going into action, each of us will don his self-made suit. Gloves, helmet—everything must be covered with Kenthal's material. He's done us a real good turn. We can laugh at his Z-rays now. And the map, Bob?"

The Skipper grinned with interest as he noted the pencilled line already marked from Tacamatra to the north-west.

"That's his course. It was all ready in case he had to quit."

"I guess that burning oil was a brain-wave," Wilmer kept saying. "They must have thought themselves hundred per cent safe. Gee! Won't the Black Handers be mad?"

He chuckled with joy.

"Now whilst you three are making yourselves rough suits to slip over," Harwood decided, "I'll take *Gannet* along to the northwest. That leads to the Bay of Panama. If we draw a blank, off we cruise through the West Indies. If no reports come in on the wireless by the time we're back at the Canal, then we'll take a run down the route to Australia."

Bob laughed.

"Nothing, Skipper," he explained. "I was only thinking what fun it is to have our speed, and our economical engines. Freedom of the seas? Liberty of the air? We're at the beginning of a new age. The world's asleep. They haven't yet realised what a wonderful era has dawned."

It did Harwood, experienced mariner as he was, a mighty great good to hear these youthful enthusiasts express their belief in overseas navigation. He realised that the names of Crane and Lorning were destined some day

to be as famous in the history of flying, as their ancestors had made seaborne shipping.

And as *Gannet* began her trans-continental trip through the dusky sky, over the tops of forests never yet penetrated by the feet of man, crossing rivers that barely reflected the least glimmer of light, laughter rose from the cockpit. The handy Higgin was thoroughly enjoying himself with sharp knife and sail-needle, and Wilmer had already cut out a most ingenious jumper to protect the upper half of his body. There was a keen longing to array themselves in this asbestos gaberdine and put Kenthal's rays to the severest test.

Now it was just after midday, when *Gannet* had completed her overland voyage and was already in full sight of the Pacific at the Colombian coast, that she saw the unusual sight of a two-masted cargo-ship on fire and steaming at full speed for the sandy shore.

"The Black Handers! They've resumed their work!"

Harwood circled around, exchanged signals with the vessel's captain, made sure that the latter was keeping the flames under control, and learned that another ship was being attacked towards the Galapagos Islands.

"Quite obvious that Kenthal intends to make a big gamble. He's working the Panama-New Zealand track," the Skipper remarked to Bob, when at this moment up came Wilmer.

"Seaplane not far away," he began breathless. "She's got a supply vessel somewhere about."

"Quite sure?"

"Yep! Keeps talking to her by radio. Call sign is XPZ. It's been getting stronger during the last half hour."

"Did you get the message?"

"Only bits and pieces . . . bad atmospheric this forenoon . . . another magnetic storm about."

"But exactly what was Kenthal saying?"

Wilmer was bursting with excitement: he

had the instinct that big things were now about to happen any moment.

"Couldn't get a whole sentence, but that's how much I've decoded." He produced a crumpled bit of paper, well thumbed, and bearing Wilmer's scrawly writing. Harwood read it aloud slowly, and then repeated the words.

". . . . alongside for diamonds, bars of gold bullion . . . hundred gallons juice ready . . ."

"Well, Skip'?"

"It means that XPZ is to hurry up and meet the seaplane, who has relieved a liner of many thousand pounds' worth of wealth. Probably the value of a million dollars is about to be transhipped. When that's completed, the supply vessel is to be ready with so many hundred gallons of fuel for the aircraft tanks."

Harwood became infected with excitement likewise. Whacking the *Gannet* up to her topmost speed, he began zigzagging across the

steamship lane, but nothing came into view save a tramp steamer, a schooner flying the French flag probably bound for the Society Islands to collect turtles, and a fast liner already within sight of Panama Bay.

"We've got to settle with the Black Handers this very day," Harwood insisted, with no little anxiety. "If they get clear to roam the Pacific, Admiral Rawlyn will never forgive us. If only we could see the newspapers, we'd find that all the marine insurance people, all the shipowners and merchants of the world, are worrying. Whether we sink or swim, whether we live or die, doesn't matter in the big scheme of things. But dead or alive, Kenthal and his crowd must finish their game before the next sunset."

There was no denying the Skipper's deep seriousness. Bob had seldom known their beloved friend and shipmate so determined, yet so expressive of impending crisis. Somehow, with that extraordinarily developed sea-

sense cultivated during many voyages in every sea and all manner of ships, Harwood had become possessed also of a remarkable intuition. Many a time it had surprised the boys by its uncanny accuracy.

Just after the three had come up from lunch, and Higgin was finishing his watch, there was a sudden report.

"Curious object on the starboard bow. Bearing by compass about east-nor'-east."

"Go for it and investigate," was Harwood's immediate order. Then, a few minutes later, he himself took over the controls and there was a general feeling of suspense until the object was descried clearly.

Wilmer was the first definitely to settle that it was a liner of perhaps 20,000 tons.

"Looks to me down by the head. I'll swear she is."

"Anyway she's stopped and blowing off steam pretty hearty."

Harwood said nothing to the boys' com-

ments. He guessed readily enough what had happened, and his mind was formulating a plan forthwith.

“Don anti-ray suits, and then everyone to action stations. Remember this—if there’s a scrap, it may mean a fight to the finish.”

By the time the guns were reported correct, *Gannet* was slightly opening up the distance between the big steamer and several small dots at varying spaces on her port side.

“She’s lowered two of her boats!”

“They’re rowing off to a . . . It’s Kenthal’s seaplane. The Black Handers are waving them to hurry.” Bob hesitated until he could grasp the situation in detail. “Aha! The steamer’s flying a signal. I recognise those flags.”

“What is it, Bob?”

“Means—‘Am sending my boats in accordance with your instructions.’ Don’t you see the other bunting hoisted from the seaplane? Why! What colossal cheek! That’s the Black

Handers' order to abandon ship and come alongside."

Harwood was listening to every word, but his thoughts and decision he was not yet ready to reveal. There might still be a slip, and his chiefest fear just now was that the enemy might sight *Gannet* too quickly.

Coming up against the wind, he planed down a few hundred feet, passed along the liner's starboard side and now at such low altitude that her great black hull prevented the seaplane from suspecting the flying-boat's arrival.

Some of the passengers rushed over to this side on the upper decks, and at first seemed inclined to panic. But the moment Harwood and the boys waved greetings, fear gave way to wild joy, and a tremendous cheer rose over the calm sea.

"Bother! That gives us away! Kenthal may hear. Can't be helped," the Skipper had muttered in quick succession. And then, as soon

as he had rounded the liner's bows, he made a direct line for the Black Handers' craft.

"Stand by! Wait for the word. As soon as your sights come on—report."

Two seconds pause.

"Coming on, sir," (from the foremost cockpit).

"Just coming on now," shouted Higgin.

"Then fire—and keep on firing."

The effect was dramatic. Taken completely by surprise, just as a bearded man was receiving from the liner's purser a tin box, the Black Handers began to shout and gesticulate. The purser's boat was kicked off, someone was hastening to start engines, but in the meantime one of the enemy was working the box-like instrument placed in the extreme forward end of the seaplane. There was a hiss, a sparkle, then a great effulgence.

"Searchlight?"

"Why no, Bob. That's the Z-rays. Now for the test."

But *Gannet* was turning and twisting so as to keep most of the while directly over-head. Bullets were raining down with rapid patter on the enemy's upper plane, but so far the rays had not been able to bear vertically.

"She's off. They're taxying now . . . she's in the air . . . she's making for the coast of Mexico."

Then to four pairs of eyes was exhibited the sight of a man being hurled by his mates from cockpit headfirst into the Pacific. With a flop he disappeared into the unfathomable ocean.

"Brutes!" Bob despised them. "Wounded or not wounded, they've no right to drown their own man. Hullo! They're fighting each other—they're trying to get rid of another fellow."

And before *Gannet* could even think of stopping, a second figure was forced against the cockpit coaming, and by sheer superiority of strength made to fall headfirst likewise.

"That's cold murder," Harwood condemned. "They're doing it to lighten the craft. You won't find any more such incidents. Why? The original Black Handers have got rid of the two who brought out the seaplane from England."

"Callous criminals!" Wilmer was filled with indignant hatred.

It was intriguing to watch Harwood's handling of *Gannet* just then. He was taking no risks with those flashing rays: they might still disable eyes which could be protected only by mere glass goggles.

What did surprise all four adventurers was the enemy's speed. These "Isis" engines were considerably more powerful than their makers had advertised. Evidently the Thames builders had meant the craft to be a dark horse in the Schneider Cup contest. The Hawks' private intelligence concerning the most likely craft must have been excellent.

But *Gannet* was still decidedly faster; she

proved this by manoeuvring for position and avoiding the death-rays, when all of a sudden there was a crack and snap, followed by the alarming sound of a motor gone bad.

"Starboard wing propeller smashed to bits!" Bob was the first to announce.

Harwood's face was no longer cool and immobile. He was annoyed that the adversary could have got in such a lucky shot from aft, but the whirr of a racing engine was driving him nearly mad.

"Cut out that starboard motor, Higgin, before there's damage."

The Petty Officer obeyed with alacrity, but the moment he showed his raised head there came a terribly hot fire from the seaplane's guns.

"I'll teach 'em," Wilmer had his temper roused, and so excellent was his aim that he was able to puncture one of the enemy's floats till the sides resembled the perforations

of a sponge. "Hinder his alighting—any way!"

But *Gannet* could no longer boast of superior speed. The chase had brought both craft well away from the scene of the Z-rayed liner, whose bows had indeed been burnt through at the waterline. But whilst her foremost bulkheads would doubtless enable her to keep afloat and to steam slowly back to Panama, and the purser had been saved from delivering up all the money from the ship's safe, yet Harwood began to have some feeling of anxiety.

"Bad luck, Skipper, that propeller smashing. Still—we're not doing badly. We've headed him back from the north."

"I want to force him down to water and make them all surrender. Failing that—we'll compel them to maintain top speed till they run short of petrol."

Wilmer saw the point. "That sends him back to XPZ? To his supply ship?"

"If he can't reach his accomplices in Mexico, there's no other alternative—unless he does us in."

"I'll see Kenthal drowned first," Wilmer promised. "Skip', I've been figuring things out quite a little bit. That call sign belongs to the French schooner we saw."

The suggestion caused Harwood to think furiously.

"Is it mere surmise?"

"If I'm wrong," the boy defended, "it's the first time I've misunderstood direction and strength. We've travelled during this last hour, we've seen everything within a two-hundred mile range. Besides the steamers, there's nothing."

Harwood agreed. "The whole thing begins to get plain," he added, "the schooner was flying a false flag. She's probably come out of Acapulco, or some other Mexican port. That's where Kenthal was trying just now to make."

"There's been another revolution perhaps:

Kenthal would be in clover if he once got all his treasure into that unsettled country. The civilised Powers would find difficulty in ever obtaining his arrest," Bob remarked.

"Meanwhile that disreputable-looking schooner with the dirty topsides is cruising about full of gold bullion, diamonds and dollar notes. I wish we'd known. I wish we'd sunk her."

"I always said the Black Handers would work with some auxiliary vessel. But the Admiralty differed. No other aircraft without our economical type of motors could race across seas and countries except with secret fuel bases always ready."

"That's so, Skip'. And it's a great idea to send out a Mexican schooner. She consumes nothing, so long as she's under sail."

"And yet she's perfectly mobile with that wireless. Oh, certainly, these fellows have remarkably fine brains."

But, before another word could be spoken,

there was additional reason also to admire their good gunnery.

Harwood looked at the boys, then at Higgin, next at the three propellers.

“For the love o’ Mike . . . whatever’s happened now?”

Chapter XIV

PETTY OFFICER HIGGIN was the first to answer, and he spoke with the utterance of one who wished his words were unfounded.

“That bloke in the seaplane’s stern knows how to shoot. This time he’s done us in.”

The two boys glanced at each other. “Done us in?” they both repeated.

Nor was the suspense anything but of the briefest: for one by one each propeller began to slow down. The engines were stopping.

Without another word Harwood acted. There was no time to ask how or why, but to put the great *Gannet* into trim for a crash dive.

“Main fuel pipe pierced.” Higgin broke the terrible news, but with such lack of emotion as if he were announcing a bald, unimpressive, engineering fact.

That which now followed happened with such amazing celerity that the brain could

scarce keep up with events. Captain Harwood had lived a life of thrills in peace and war, but this sudden cutting off from all propelling power made his heart beat with the excitement of suspense.

Ten tons of metal boat cannot defy the law of gravity, and no invention could keep the *Gannet* poised in midair. On the other hand a crash dive with a craft of that size was full of direst risk.

Perhaps it was the art and resource of the trained seaman combined with that twin ability of an airman, which brought her on to the sea's surface instead of plunging vertically straight to death.

During that terrifying flight, which seemed to be an eternity of horror, there was nothing for his shipmates to do but hold on tightly, hope that the windscreens would gash nobody's head, and that in a few moments four aviators would still be able to see each other alive.

But the bump was alarming beyond all expression. The marvel remained that they had not been jolted into the Pacific.

"Look out. Return their fire."

For with immediate employment of advantage, the enemy seaplane began circling down and spattering the surrounding sea with lead. As the rattle-prattle-rat fell on hull and planes, it seemed impossible that any of Harwood's party could still be alive.

"The Z-rays! Now they come!"

The fierce heat could be felt, but the asbestos coverings had rendered perfect service, and the sharp concentration of the boys' fire drove the enemy to the south-east. For several minutes no one spoke, a more devastating attack was expected and awaited. But gradually the seaplane vanished into a mere speck, and a light fluffy cloud hid her finally from sight. It was then that Wilmer broke the silence.

"If she doesn't find her schooner, she's destined for Davy Jones," he delivered him-

self. "I distinctly noticed that we'd riddled her hull, as well as both floats, and so thoroughly that if she alights on the water, she'll sink."

"Same as us," commented Higgin.

"What's that?" demanded the Skipper. "We've got a spare bit of piping. It won't take long. We'll help. The race isn't lost till it's been won."

But the Petty Officer had been too long a mechanic not to know.

"'Xcuse me, sir, contradicting, but we're for it. We're going down to have a yarn with old Father Neptune. This poor *Gannet* will never fly again."

To Bob and Wilmer the words seemed incredible. *Gannet* doomed? Incredible. They were not thinking of themselves, but the possibility of their faithful ship ever failing them had never once been considered.

Harwood began a rapid inspection.

"That crash dive has done in the mag-

netoes," Higgin was able to convince. "Not a spark anywhere—they're drenched."

"Mph! Let's have another try, Higgin."

And the Skipper could but reluctantly admit that for once he was beaten to a standstill. The next shock came when *Gannet* took an ugly lurch forward and then settled well down by the stern, so that her tail and the lower part of her rudders were deeply submerged.

It was an awful predicament, but amid all this anxiety they had not been able to observe a squall coming along at the back of that fluffy cloud.

"The hull has been punctured badly, I've been below and tried to stop up the shot-holes," Harwood came running up from the saloon, "but the water's pouring in fast. Fellow airmen," he drew himself up with an effort, "it looks as if the big moment has come. The wireless is ruined and we can't bleat an

'S. O. S.' Even if we could, this part of the Pacific is a little too unfrequented."

Bob bit his lip. His throat seemed suddenly to have got sticky. It was so hard to find words and say the right thing. As to Wilmer, he was wondering whether this was all a dream. Could the environment of four happy people conceivably change so utterly in a flash?

"I'm sorry it's got to end like this," Harwood was continuing. "I'd hoped to have followed Admiral Rawlyn's instructions to the last syllable. Still . . . you've all been so splendid . . . and cheerful. . . . If it's good-bye, then . . . thank you: thank you one and all from the depths of my . . ."

Crack! Fury of furies!

The squall burst on them with ferocious and merciless impulse. Nature ended Harwood's sentence then and there, whipped up a roisterous sea, rocked the unfortunate *Gannet* about with such sharp quick rolls that something had to give.

"The floats! The floats! They've broken off!"

And before another word could be spoken, the great *Gannet*, already overbalanced to one side by the rolling water, yielded herself up in a more pronounced lurch and then quietly toppled right over. Even at that critical second she seemed to hesitate, tried to save herself from the inevitable, and then with a heavy splash the planes smote the waves. She would never be seen again.

But just as quickly as the squall had come, so it vanished and the waves began quietening down. Four human heads were bobbing in couples, and then without any sense of panic but with a firm quiet determination to fight against fate, each couple gained its objective. It was a temporary triumph of pluck over bad luck.

"Not so bad," Bob was trying to be cheerful as he climbed on to the starboard float that seemed intent on a cruise in the direction of

Australia. "Give us your hand, Wilmer. Lots of room for us both. Take it easy."

The boy clambered up, a distressingly dripping figure, but manfully resolved not to indicate his real feelings of sad disappointment.

"Oh, don't worry about me, old friend. This is great. Weather looks like fining up. Some squall—wasn't it? Too bad about the Skipper. And Higgin! Too bad! As white a brace of men as you'd find in a world cruise."

Bob's heart was too full to answer . . . until from the crest of a wave they espied the other float in the valley beneath; and sitting straddled across it were Harwood and the Petty Officer cracking jokes. The boys raised a cheer to declare that the contest was still undecided, that it was still possible Neptune might have to wait a while; when the crest in turn became a valley, and a solid mountain of bluey-green shut out one crew from sight of the other.

And then, just because the hopelessness of the situation was now so starkly obvious, and

no human nerve could much longer bear the strain, both boys by reaction from all this trying tension burst into loud and unrestrained laughter.

"Isn't it ridiculous? Don't we look the silliest things outside a comic picture? Wish I could sketch."

"Bob," broke in the business-like Wilmer, "if only some movie guy with his camera could come along this minute, he'd make a fortune for us all. 'Lost in the Pacific. Aviators float into port. Thrilling story of a sea-flight.' Sounds pretty good to me."

They roared in loud laughter again, as if mocking their unkind fate.

"This much is true, whatever happens," insisted Bob, trying hard to be cheery. "We've broken the record for this ocean. No one else has cruised about on damaged floats over the Pacific."

There was a slight pause, and the difficulty of maintaining this forced optimism showed

itself. "I wonder," asked Wilmer very quietly, but with honest seriousness, "I wonder if anyone will ever know we broke the record."

Bob turned his head and said nothing. He was looking in the direction where Harwood and Higgin had last been seen.

Two days and most of two nights passed. Fortunately and considerably the waves had died down, and the wind, which in its variety fairly boxed the compass, had never attained more than a gentle strength. Some couple of miles away it was just possible to identify Harwood's float: it was good to know that at least one of those two men was still alive, but whether one was dead seemed difficult to discern.

Bob had been asleep. Wilmer was on watch.

"For one jolly long iced drink in *Gannet's* saloon, and one wedge of that almond cake," longed the former, "I'd make anyone a present of all the Seven Seas."

"Oh, don't talk of such things," Wilmer

begged. "I'm trying to kid myself that I hate any kind of food. Gee! I never knew what it was to go hungry and thirsty before. I always thought those yarns about shipwrecked mariners and marooned men were a bit exaggerated. Begin to think now, those author fellows never fully realised what a fellow could suffer."

The heat of the tropical sun by day, and the trying sight by dark of well-lit liners going along the trade route to or from the Panama Canal, was maddening. And on this long second night the darkness seemed impenetrable.

It was thus that there came upon their tired vision about 3 a.m. something that might have been the evidence of a whale. Something phosphorescent came towards them slowly but deliberately: a slight ripple of water and the gradually increasing sound of a moving thing.

And next the outline of a bow cleaving the

swell, and the creaking of ropes, the whine of blocks, the slatting of sails on an idle sea.

Wilmer nudged his companion.

"Hsh! A ship! And her green starboard light clear as clear."

"Wilmer—she's being steered carelessly. There's her port light opening now. She's all over the place. Helmsman must be asleep."

They were just about to hail her with one concentrated cry, when something arrested their attention and made them halt. At one and the same time they had made the same discovery.

"The fake Frenchman! The Black Handers' supply ship! Kenthal's schooner!"

Two young hearts beat violently. It was the supreme climax in all their hours of life. Here was the one great chance that could ever pass their way between death and deliverance. So momentous an opportunity surely had never been presented before to any lad's.

"Don't shout. Paddle hard with your

hands," Wilmer advised and began. "If we miss, we lose every shred of hope."

By the greatest effort two pairs of energetic hands, to represent human paddlewheels, succeeded in driving the light float dead across the schooner's bows, insomuch that the float was struck beam on and knocked to leeward: yet not before Bob had seized hold of the chain bobstay, gripped Wilmer by the collar, and then waited to draw a full breath.

The next duty was to climb cat-like on to the bowsprit, shin along inboard under cover of the bellying forestaysail and begin crawling the length of the deck from for'ard to aft. Every step was in the nature of a great adventure: every moment the form of some bullying rascal was expected to rush out from the shadows.

But the rest of the adventure was less difficult. As Bob and Wilmer had suspected, the Dago crew were asleep. Most of them had turned in, and the light from the saloon lamp



TWO PAIRS OF ENERGETIC HANDS SUCCEEDED IN DRIVING THE
LIGHT FLOAT DEAD ACROSS THE SCHOONER'S BOWS

enabled the boys to see four or five figures of unkempt men snoring in rough wooden bunks.

On deck there was only the steersman in charge, but the night was drowsy and warm; he had lashed the wheel and dozed off. The situation became immediately clear.

“Quick! Bind him hand and foot, whilst I stop him shouting.”

Bob followed Wilmer’s hint and in a few moments the steersman, with a handkerchief gagging his mouth, was lying face downwards, hands behind his back and ankles secured to a heavy cleat.

“Now for the main hatch. Help me to haul that big hawser. Good!”

With the additional weight of such things as a couple of iron bars, pump handle, and a small anchor, the hatch slide was fixed. In the lock a key still remained. It needed but a moment to give a turn and render any exit on deck from below impossible. A similar precaution barred the forehatch.

"And that's that! Next job is to find the Skipper and Higgin. Day's just dawning, but there's no wind," Bob at the wheel looked up at the sky. He had not observed Wilmer dodging about. And then there came a sudden vibration.

"Engine's working all right," the latter announced cheerfully. It was not till then that Bob had thought about the motor separated off by a bulkhead right aft.

"Bravo, Wilmer. We're going ahead fine. If only we can find our good shipmates. . . ."

Throughout that morning, whilst angry cries rose from the imprisoned Black Handers and their Dago accomplices, Bob's eyes were anxiously searching the Pacific. And then just after the sun had reached its zenith, the missing raft was sighted.

Harwood and Higgin were at the point of exhaustion when the boys threw a rope and tried to signify that they would tow the float for a minute. But lack of food and drink, the

anxieties of the last few hours, and the inevitability of death, had taken away some of the customary activity.

Just at that moment there was a violent hammering and shouting from below. To Bob, as he stood by the wheel, and steered the schooner almost into the wind so as to take way off her, it sounded as if the prisoners were about to smash down the engine-room bulk-head and burst their way on deck.

He was wondering how it would be possible to fight several men, yet handle the ship in such a manner that two weary aviators could be rescued.

"Don't fail with that heaving line this time," he warned Wilmer. "I've thrown the motor into neutral. We ought to fetch right alongside."

The boy-captain hoped his judgment would not be so far out that Harwood could miss. It was a unique experience to be in command of a ninety-ton sailing vessel, and under any

other circumstances he would have relished the task.

But two valuable lives were at stake, and his own seamanship was being put to a great test. Then, having at length got the craft with her bows in the same direction as the float was heading, Bob called to his mate in true sailor fashion:

“Ready the line. Standy-by. I’ve luffed right into the wind’s eye.”

Chapter XV

IT WAS a neat manoeuvre. Distance and speed had been reckoned to a nicety, and the schooner had just way enough when the float bumped up quietly against her stained hull. A couple of light ropes went hurtling through the air, and it required little time for Harwood and Higgin to slip a bowline round the waist. Next, scrambling up by the chain-plates and stepping over the high gunwale, they arrived on deck and collapsed.

Wilmer was ready with a dipper of water from a cask amidships.

“Drink this, Skipper,” he implored. But Harwood passed the tin to Higgin. “He’s feeling it worse than me.” Half a minute later, with lips and throat moistened, the same jolly liveliness began to reassert itself. Bob had found a hunk of bread and cheese, some fruit, and a mug of cold coffee which had

evidently been part of the Dago-helmsman's supper, until sleep had become overmastering.

"Bit of food, sir," the boy offered *Gannet's* late commander, "though it's not as appetising as Higgin has been giving us."

And even now Harwood refused to touch a morsel until he was convinced that the boys had already broken their fast. As to the Petty Officer, he was trying to pretend that he was in need of nothing. But Wilmer was firm.

"Eat heartily," he insisted. "Plenty more grub down below—though we haven't had time yet to investigate."

And then, at last, Harwood tried to comprehend the whole wonder of this reunion.

"We lost sight of you two boys: we'd given you up for lost within an hour of poor *Gannet's* end. By all that's reasonable, how did you get hold of this schooner? That's what I want to know before I eat another mouthful."

Bob smiled. Wilmer winked.

"See her name?" the former asked. "Look at this lifebuoy."

"I notice the word *Mauposa*. Well?"

"Known on the radio as XPZ," explained Wilmer. "Now you understand."

"Yes, but. . . . The crew?"

"Down below. They're quiet just at present. Five or ten minutes ago they threatened to smash up the happy home."

Bob filled in the blanks and related how the *Mauposa* had been sighted.

"But Kenthal's seaplane?"

"She was so riddled and perforated by *Gannet's* gunnery, that she must have sunk almost as soon as she alighted on the water."

Harwood needed to be convinced completely. He was never anything unless thorough.

"But you didn't see her again? You can't really be absolutely sure that"

The boy was grinning with a quiet confidence.

"No, we never sighted her from the moment she gave us her parting fusillade, and vanished behind the cloud. But she's gone to the bottom right enough. At any rate the blackbearded Kenthal has parted from her. It's doubtful if he'll ever go flying again."

"How d'you know that?"

"Because I had a look at him. He's not a very pleasant fellow when he's asleep, and he's inclined to get restive."

There rose from the chinks of the hatch the growl of a voice threatening all manner of things in several languages.

"That's the Professor," Wilmer chortled with glee. "He's a lovely loud-speaker, but a bit harsh. And he can't make out what's happened. Thinks the helmsman from Aca-pulco has betrayed him, as Kenthal would himself."

Harwood glanced around the untidy deck. His sailor eyes could not help noticing that she had not been washed down or painted for

many a long day. Ropes were frayed, there was not a bit of varnish anywhere, and the spars badly needed scraping.

"Helmsman? What happened to him?"

Bob stood aside from the wheel, and showed the unshaven figure in an old shirt and trousers that once might have been white.

"A rather tired gentleman, Skipper. Don't think we need wake him."

Harwood swept the crumbs from his mouth and rose to his feet. "I feel ready for anything now. Come on, Higgin, you're a great boxer. We can leave the deck in charge of our mates and tackle the rest of the job."

"Can't I come, too?" Wilmer, the glutton for adventure, begged.

So the hatch was thrown open quickly, and just inside there appeared several of the vilest faces that the boy had ever previously beheld.

Cut-throats! Pirates! Crooks!

They seemed to represent a composite picture of all three classes.

And then came the rush up the steps of the companion, whilst one of them raised an ugly knife, whose sharp point flashed in the early morning sun. But Higgin's ham-like fist was too heavy and too quick.

"Oh no, you don't," he caught the first man a terrific blow on the ear, and sent the knife with its owner tumbling over the crew on to the floor of the cabin. It was quite a half minute before they could sort themselves out and stand up.

But by this time they had been hustled to the far end of the stuffy cabin with its coffin-like berths, and Harwood was moving his right hand ominously in his coat pocket. Every crook from Mexico to Moscow knew what that signified. Automatics have no nationality, and a bullet is no respecter of persons.

"Hands up! Or you'll find it's too late. Never seen anyone shoot through his pocket before? Well, here goes."

Harwood pretended to wait a couple of seconds, but already seven pairs of arms raised themselves well above the shoulders.

“Good! But I was brought up to obey an order smartly. Next time you’re told to do anything, you’ll jump lively to it. Got that?”

There was an extraordinary stillness in the cabin. Even the ticking of the clock seemed to intensify the suspense. But Harwood, with Higgin at one side and Wilmer on his left, was in no hurry. With scrutinising gaze he was looking into the very souls of this rough crowd; sizing them up, almost reading their thoughts.

“Before we begin, listen. I stand for no fooling. Any of you, who thinks he’s clever enough, can try it—just once. I’m used to handling ships and men, and there’s room for only one boss in one ship at one time. Now then, which of you is Kenthal?”

The bearded man with a fine intellectual

forehead, but shifty cunning eyes, spoke with a guttural bass voice and replied:

"I am Professor Carl Kenthal. Whom have I the honour to address?"

But for the moment the prisoner's question was ignored.

"Which are the two men who started out in the amphibian from Ireland with you?"

"They stand on my right hand and on my left," the Professor indicated with his head. Again Harwood observed with surprise that at least one was rather the hard-jawed unemotional business-man than the stereotyped criminal of fiction. But the third might have been anything from a sneak-thief to a gangster.

"So you are the trio who terrorised shipping in two oceans, and would have kept on at the game? You lost your amphibian. What happened to the stolen seaplane?"

Kenthal's explanation coincided with Bob's inference. As soon as *Mauposa* had been

located, and a boat sent off, the seaplane had foundered.

"You put up a good fight," Harwood congratulated, "but it's a pity the cause was such a despicable one. You knocked my *Gannet* out of action and"

The three men were startled. So this was the Captain who had chased them, attacked them, ruined their well-laid plans, driven them all over the map and given them no peace? This was he who had made their seaplane no longer seaworthy and had caused them this present melancholy?

It was a dramatic moment: a face-to-face meeting of two rival forces.

". . . . and now I'm going to place you out of action by removing all dangerous weapons. My two shipmates here will now search you. Keep hands up."

Five minutes later Wilmer and Higgin had been able to collect two automatics, a heavy

German revolver, and several knives that had never been designed for domestic cutlery.

Selecting the revolver for himself, and giving an automatic each to Higgin and the boy, Harwood then bade the prisoners come forward one by one, and submit to having hands bound. Two then were locked up in the foc'sle, one in the lamp-room, one in the Captain's cabin. But the three Black Handers he preferred to keep on deck lashed safely to the rigging, in which situation the sleepy helmsman of Dago breed presently found himself likewise.

"Before blindfolding you," Harwood added, "I'd like to give you a bit of advice. Should you escape a fair trial for your delinquencies and due punishment—though I hardly think you'll again be allowed to carry on this kind of warfare against innocent shipping—let me suggest that you're still less than a hundred-per-cent expert. A really great pirate, or con-

summate crook, never takes things for granted. He makes sure."

Kenthal wondered what Harwood was driving at. The other two were feeling extremely uneasy. Was he making fools of them before the hired Dagoes?

"I'll tell you what I mean," continued *Gannet's* skipper. And he drew from his right pocket a wooden tobacco-pipe. "This was the only weapon I had till you so simply handed me your interesting collection. You allowed yourselves to be bluffed: you could have shot all of us stone dead."

Kenthal's temper burst. He broke into a torrent of language, not one word of which was comprehensible to Wilmer, Higgin or Harwood.

"Ah, Professor," Harwood had not quite finished, "it's useless to bewail what can never return. The fortune of war is a fickle creature. Let us not pursue a painful subject further. So long as you're content not to endeavour

escape, I for my part shall treat you well. After you leave my hands, and find yourselves in someone else's charge, I hold myself no longer responsible."

Higgin had to turn his head in amusement.

"Tricked the Hawks over proper—that you did. They're so mad just now, that they'd kill the three of us twice over, if they could. Now, sir, isn't it time I did a spell at the wheel? Those young gen'lmen have both had a hard time lately."

Next day, rather late in the afternoon, the schooner came motoring into Panama, and five of the worst scallawags that ever went afloat were handed over to the authorities.

"I guess we've seen these guys before," recognised a burly American official. "They belong to the toughest crowd that ever tried to land liquor on the Californian coast. That's the least of the charges hanging over them. Thank you, Cap'n. We'll be mighty pleased to take care of the bunch."

Twenty-four hours later a British light-cruiser, bound from Melbourne for Portsmouth, happened to be passing through the Canal. In her travelled Captain Harwood, Bob Crane, Wilmer Lorning, together with Carl Kenthal, sometime Professor of Science in the University of Vienna. The light-cruiser's commanding officer seemed to have received confidential information which threw considerable light on the two accomplices. As soon as the latter had been put in irons and taken down below, and an armed Marine posted outside the cell, the biographical details were supplied.

Harwood related the facts briefly to the boys.

"Kenthal," he regretted, "had a brilliant career and made several extremely ingenious scientific inventions, chiefly connected with electricity."

"Then why ever couldn't he run straight?" Wilmer wanted to know.

"Unfortunately he took to gambling, in order to supplement his income, and got heavily into debt. From gambling he became associated with some notorious forgers of notes and coins. Very clever counterfeits they were, too."

"And then?" Bob required.

"A big international gang of crooks, which used to work the smoke-rooms of Atlantic liners and get rich on card-sharping, made Kenthal their chief. His brilliant brain was invaluable. One day he heard of the Z-ray invention, and that it had reached Admiral Rawlyn. Kenthal saw tremendous possibilities, if only the documents could be obtained."

"But how did he get them? That's what I should like to find out."

Harwood shrugged his shoulders.

"Merely a matter of carefully contrived tactics, and a handsome bribe. Just as his brain arranged for the theft of airplanes (including one from a German airway corpora-

tion), and the creation of a world-wide network of agents”

“That means even signing on accomplices to serve aboard oiltankers?”

“... so he made the theft worth while to the ex-acrobat who now has the reputation of being the king of London’s cat-burglars. The man worked to Kenthal’s schedule. It was arranged that at a certain hour and minute Admiral Rawlyn should be called out into the corridor. It was at that time exactly that the lithe burglar climbed from the roof by a drain-pipe, picked up the bundle of documents, and slid down to the ground. Before the Admiral had realised the loss, Kenthal’s accomplice was in the safest place for any criminal.”

“Meaning?”

“In the middle of London’s traffic—walking up to an omnibus, as if nothing had happened.”

“And the other two Black Handers?”

"The second in command is an ex-convict. He was once president of a Chicago bank. Something shady happened, and he just disappeared. How he met Kenthal we don't know. But the third man comes of Russian origin. For six months he was an able pilot on one of the European air-routes. One day he quarrelled with his manager. Next day the manager was found shot through the heart, and the Russian was missing."

The boys drew a sigh of relief.

"A very tough lot. No wonder they gave us a good run. It's just as well," thought Wilmer, "that such people should be locked up and put away carefully."

Admiral Rawlyn was of the same opinion. He was waiting on the jetty at Portsmouth when the cruiser berthed, and he hurried up the gangway to give *Gannet's* crew a wonderful reception.

"For the first time in history," he thumped his fist, "piracy has been committed from

the air. But you four gallant fellows have not only brought criminals to justice, you've smashed up a supremely dangerous system that no Navy could have destroyed."

Harwood, however, was sorry about one point.

"Those Z-ray documents. I searched the schooner from deck to keel. Not a sign of them. Kenthal must have dropped them into the sea."

But, on the way up to London in the Admiral's car, Rawlyn drew forth a few sheets of crumpled papers and began straightening them out. They were stained and torn, but still legible.

"What's more, they're complete. I'm happy now," the elder man beamed.

Harwood examined the type-script and noted the inked diagrams.

"Where did you find these, sir?"

"I brought with me a couple of London detectives from Scotland Yard. They searched

Kenthal carefully. These were discovered stitched up in the lining of his waistcoat."

Harwood whistled with wonder.

"And to think we never thought of that."

"You four flying-men seem to have thought of everything. Don't worry. We're not going to forget what you've done for us. The Lords of the Admiralty are waiting to thank you all personally; the Federation of Shipowners are giving you a public dinner at the Ritz-Carlton next week; and Higgin has been promoted already to Chief Petty Officer, with seniority from the day *Gannet* left Portsmouth."

That evening, Harwood stood the boys a dinner at the Modern Mariners' Club, and then took them on to a theatre.

"Gee!" exclaimed Wilmer at the end of a perfect day. "It's certainly been a great little cruise. Seems too bad you should now leave us, and go back to command that ship *Speranza*."

